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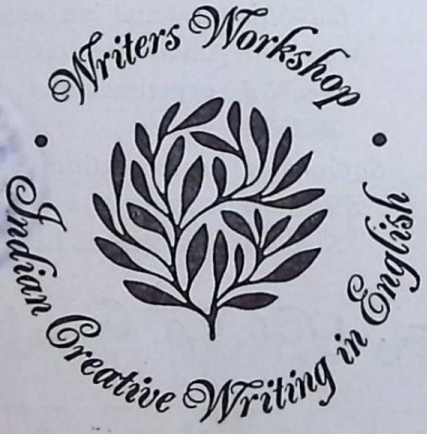

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CHECKMATE
&
Other Stories

Humera Ahmed

A
Writers Workshop
Publication

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The Author

Humera Ahmed is an officer of the 1979 batch of the Civil Service, presently working as Director Postal Services in Bombay. After graduating with Honours in English Literature from Elphinstone College in 1975 she did a stint in journalism and then postgraduated in English Literature from Bombay University. She appeared for the Civil Services after teaching for a year and was selected in the Central Services. Many of her short stories have been published in leading magazines and some have been read over AIR. The dominant note and all-pervasive portraiture in her stories is of the educated and liberated middleclass Muslim woman—an image familiar to her but not to the general reading public in India. This is due to the writer's background: an amalgam of modern and traditional; of aristocratic and agrarian. Her father's family formed part of the leading nobility in the erstwhile State of Hyderabad, her mother's part of the landed gentry who had taken to education in the nineteenth century. Her mother was the first Muslim postgraduate in Vidharba, and also a well-known social worker and educationist. The women portrayed in the stories are therefore a far cry from the perceived image of the familiar Muslim woman. They are strong, articulate, gutsy and individualistic, bravely meeting the challenges of fate.

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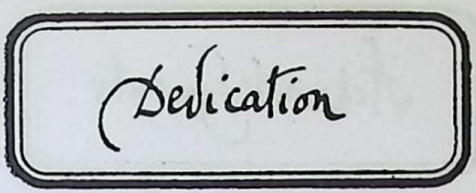

Dedicated to the memory of my mother Razia Sultana whose loving and gentle presence was a solace to me during my darkest hours and whose fragrant memories still continue to give succour and strength to face the future.

"I know I will never walk alone."

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"The Odour" published in *Women's Era*.
"Destiny" published in *Savvy*.
"The silence that is more eloquent than speech" published in *Women's Era*.
"The Light at the End of the Tunnel" published in *The Hindu*.

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Checkmate

THE SOUNDS OF THE DHOLAK REVERBERATED ALL OVER THE house; peals of laughter echoed in the air, there was gaiety everywhere. Shakira looked bewitching—draped in a yellow gold *dupatta* with sequins gleaming in the light. Her skin glowed like gold with the *ubtan*, and the *gharara* suit lent grace to her slim and supple figure.

"The bridal glow is on my child's face," remarked her *ayah*, Salimun.

"This is the first time I have heard of such a glow," chuckled Vinita. "I never acquired one when I got married."

"Uhmm! How can you girls acquire such a glow? All of you keep mixing with boys. Why, Vinita *bibi*, you had known Anil *saheb* for two years before marriage—what was there to look forward. . ."

"Oh shut up, Salimun," said Shakira feeling greatly embarrassed. Vinita and her other friends and cousins were laughing uncontrollably at Salimun's rustic philosophy.

Vinita said, "Let her say what she wants. It hardly matters. Anil and I have been married for the last two years."

"Oh? So now we know the reason why Shakira ran from the boys. . . it was for the bridal glow," said her cousin.

"Hope it will be worth it, dearie. For all you know, America-based Asad Malik may appreciate some real experience," teased Vinita.

"Of course it is worth it," Shannu *khala* intervened, and

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as for lack of experience, a man appreciates it, whether he is modern or traditional, India-based or Europe-based—men are the same all over."

Shakira looked aghast at her aunt; she had never heard her speak so candidly; perhaps now that she was about to join the august group of the married she was being initiated into it.

There was a commotion outside and the honking of car horns penetrated the sounds of the *dholak*. Her niece and nephew Hasan and Husna darted into the room chanting: "The bridegroom's people have come! The bridegroom's people have come!"

Shannu *khala* and her cousins rushed to meet the guests while Vinita helped in getting her ready for the *god-bhari* ceremony. After giving some touches to her make-up they hurried her into the main hall. There to the accompaniment of the *dholak* and songs they performed the ceremony: filling her lap with fruits—symbolising fruitfulness in marriage.

That night Shakira could hardly sleep; it was the last night she would be spending under her father's roof as Shakira Hasan. Tomorrow she would be Shakira Malik! How strange the whole thing seemed; overnight her whole personality would be transformed. There was a dull ache inside her—a sense of forlornness pervading her whole being. Why was it that a woman had to give up everything—her family, friends, home—to accept her husband's home and family? Was it worth it? What did she know about Asad? She had seen his photographs and heard that he was a charming young man and quite a successful architect. Was that sufficient to decide?

Her parents and relatives thought so, and therefore tomorrow she was to be married to this complete stranger and settle down with him in an unknown land amidst an alien people. She had felt a cold fear grip her whenever she thought of all that she had to leave, and fear lurked in her mind—supposing she found no acceptance there?

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"How can that be?" Vinita had argued. "In America life is fun, free and good—no in-laws, no troublesome relatives bothering you, no social mores. It is just you and your man."

But her heart was numb with a vague fear—fear of the unknown, fear of the proximity and intimacy that a marriage entails. She was ignorant of the intimacies of a man-woman relationship. Her knowledge was limited to the bedroom scenes depicted in Hindi films or those related by Vinita and Rachna, her married friends. When Rachna had narrated the experience of her wedding night, they listened awed and breathless.

"Was it very painful?" Sunita had enquired.

To this Vinita had replied with a knowing look at Rachna, "It's a pleasurable kind of pain."

She hoped he would be gentle. She was apprehensive of the pain and felt horrified at the idea of baring herself before a man. But then there were millions of women who were in the same state as her—marrying a complete stranger. And the *suhag raat* was remembered with such tenderness and nostalgia in the Hindi films, it must be good!

"Can't get any sleep?" She heard her mother's voice in the dark still night and felt her hand gently caress her head.

"Yes, Ma. Just thinking, I will be leaving this house tomorrow."

"You'll be going to your own house tomorrow. This is what every girl looks forward to. You are going into a very established family. Our families have known each other for two generations. You are fortunate indeed!"

"*Haan.* But we do not know each other."

"Oh, that same old story. You will get to know him soon enough," she said smilingly and added, "None of us did and everything has been alright and so will it be in your case too. Come now, try to get sleep. Tomorrow is the day!"

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The next day passed too fast and in the evening the *nikah* was performed binding her to Asad and his family. Through tears she bid farewell to her beloved parents, relatives, friends and her home. . . .

The gentle breeze blew through the scented jasmines filling the room with a heady fragrance. She sat demurely on the bedecked bridal bed with hand numb and heart beating wildly—waiting for Asad.

Asad seemed to be taking his time. Her head ached with the weight of the heavy *ghunghat*; her wrist watch indicated that it would soon be midnight. She felt exhausted and sank her head on her arms.

The door opened and Asad walked in. Through the *ghunghat* she saw that he was as goodlooking as he appeared in his photographs.

"Hello there, why don't you lift the heavy *ghunghat*? You must be feeling hot."

She hesitatingly did, her eyes downcast and her hands shaking.

"It's difficult, isn't it, facing a stranger? I can quite understand it."

Her heart warmed up to him—he understood her.

"In America such a marriage would be beyond one's imagination."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Are you happy? Was this marriage forced on you?"

His gaze was intense. She stammered, "N. . n. . no!"

"But this marriage was forced on me," she heard him say and the words passed through her like an electric shock.

"You didn't w. . a. . nt. ." she couldn't continue. The words choked in her throat. This couldn't be happening to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know how difficult it must be for you to take all this."

"If you realise it then why did you agree?" she asked

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bitterly. Did he really realise how he had shattered her world?

"My mother wouldn't listen. She wanted this marriage at any cost. She wouldn't agree to my marrying Jean."

"Jean?" she repeated, dazed.

"Jean is an American working in my firm. She is my live-in girl-friend. I love her and cannot give her up. I suppose we have to put up with this marriage. Play the roles, I mean. I am sorry but I can't be your husband."

"How long will this last—this farce?"

"I don't know. . . perhaps. . ."

"No, how can you?" She was heartbroken and the words came rushing out, "All you know is that you cannot disobey your mother and marry Jean but you can mess up my life by not giving up. . ."

He looked shaken at her bitterness. He sat beside her and said gently, "You are hurt. I know I am weak and shouldn't have agreed to this marriage. But we will work it out. You are going to join me in the States in a couple of months. It will be easier to annul the marriage there. You will get over it soon. Think over it. I will see you in the morning." With this he opened the door and was gone.

Shakira crumbled on the bed and broke into uncontrollable sobs. Was it for this that she had left her family and friends? Could she go back and pick up the threads of her life at home? He had so coolly stated that she would get over it soon. Did he not know that Indian society never accepted a woman rejected by her husband? Surely this was not the fate of every girl. None of her friends experienced such anguish. For them it was a dream come true. For her it was a nightmare. If only she could wake up and find it was just a bad dream. But this was reality, however nightmarish—and from this moment her life would never be the same. What should she do now?

She got up and looked out of the window. It was a star-studded night with a silvery moon. It was a night that

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lovers long for, and here she was, alone—all alone on her wedding night. Oh God, she thought in agony, why should she be denied love and motherhood? Was it not her right? The stars, the moon and the dark, still night, the whole universe seemed to cry in unison: "It's your right" Then who was he to deny her? To bind her in this mockery—this farcical marriage. She wouldn't let him deny her. She would go to the States. But that was nearly two months away—there was sufficient time. She wiped her eyes and smilingly went to bed.

As the air hostess announced that they were landing at New York any moment, Shakira took a quick look at herself in the pocket mirror and applied a dash of rouge to her pale cheeks and ran a comb through her close-cropped hair.

She wondered if Asad would recognise her. In the past two months after his departure so much had taken place. She was visibly transformed. Her long brown hair had disappeared and the cute page-boy cut lent her an air of innocence and coquetry.

Asad was at the airport, tired and listless but brightened up upon seeing her. "You look cute."

In the car she inquired sarcastically, "I hope I will not be sharing the flat with Jean."

"No," he replied, "Jean will be staying separately. I have a small apartment downtown. I am leaving my flat for you."

"Oh! How very nice of you two," she said in a sugary voice.

"Shakira, I am terribly sorry. I know the hell you are going through. You have lost weight—become so pale. I can't express how grateful I am to you for going along with my plans. You have been so understanding. I really respect and admire you. I am sure we will be able to work out something. It would have been awful back home. No one would have allowed us to live our lives."

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Shakira smirked. "By us, you obviously mean Jean and yourself."

He pretended not to hear and said, "Well, here we are."

As they got into the flat Shakira felt the familiar sensation and rushed to the sink and threw up.

Asad came behind her and said concerned, "It must be the flight. One tends to get nausea."

"No," she said firmly, her gaze intense and clear, her voice calm, "it's because I am expecting."

There was a pindrop silence in the two-roomed apartment. Asad seemed transfixed—struck by lightning. Very slowly he found his moorings and asked in a daze, "Expecting? How? Who is the father?"

She replied calmly as she splashed water over her face, "You, of course."

"Me! How can that be? It is impossible!"

"Why not? Aren't you my legal husband? I have the *nikahnamah* to prove it. So you are my child's father."

"Don't talk rubbish. Tell me the truth."

"Damn you," she cursed, her eyes blazing. "How dare you demand an explanation! The truth is simple—You mucked up my life, made me part of your selfish plans. And now kindly listen to my plans. You can stay with your darling Jean while I have my baby. By and by we will come to a solution. Till then our legal marriage, however farcical, goes on."

Asad stared at her in disbelief. He was stunned at her gumption. Where was that gentle, shy, timid girl he had married? Before him was an assured, confident woman, indifferent to the mores of society.

"I can't believe it. How could you do this?"

"You can believe whatever you wish to," she said disdainfufly and stalked into the living room and switched on the television.

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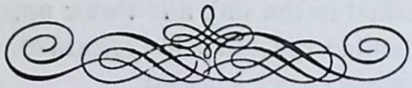
The Odour



THE RECEIVER SLID EROM HER FINGERS AS THE FULL IMPACT OF the words hit her. A wave of shock passed through her. Ulfat was no more! He had been dead for three days! Ya Allah! What a way to go. Her heart seemed to have stopped beating, her hands were numb and darkness spread before her eyes as her body slumped against the table.

It was nearly noon when she regained consciousness: nearly four hours had lapsed since she had received the shattering news. She heard Nita's voice and then another familiar one—sounded like Chand *khala's*, Ulfat's aunt! So they had been informed: Nita must have been at it. After all, Alibag was hardly two to three hours away from Bombay.

Of course it was no use informing her parents—they would never come, even at such a time. She knew her father too well. Tears pricked her eyes as she remembered the day she left the house earning his wrath for the man who was no more. No more! The word struck an unfamiliar emotion in her: grief mingled with relief.

Chand *khala* had come in the room, her face swollen with weeping. Seeing that she had regained consciousness she said gently: "*Appia* is in Ulfat's flat. When you are feeling alright we will go there. Take milk."

"No, *khala*, please," she begged.

"You must, my dear. If not for yourself then for the life growing within you," Nita said as she came in with a glass of milk. Tabassum took the glass from her. Yes, she must, for the sake of the unborn child. Had she not left Ulfat's house to save herself from an imminent miscarriage?

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Otherwise she would still have been there, bruised and battered and the life inside her extinct. But in that case Ulfat would not have gone this way. She bit her lip to hold back the fresh sobs rising in her throat. Who would have thought that it would all end up like this? Oh God, the agony of it all. Spare anyone this anguish of loving and hating the same man.

As they approached the dilapidated building in the Khar Colony she tried to avoid the eyes of the neighbours gathered around who had often been witness to scenes of Ulfat's drunken violence.

The moment they ascended the stairs of their two-room flat their senses were assailed by the rancid odour of decomposed flesh. His dead body had been rotting for three full days and the stench pervaded the whole floor. He mother-in-law had sprinked attar and rose water but the stink of decomposed flesh mixed with the smell of liquor hung in the air. It seemed to seep into her body with every breath she took. She retched, and rushing to the sink threw up. Her mother-in-law came up behind her and gently stroked her back. She turned and winced at the sight of the old lady. At this age to lose her only child! She sank her hand on her breasts moaning, "Oh Ammi! Ammi!" But the old lady seemed to bear her grief stoically and consoled her, "Now, *beti*. Take hold of yourself. You must give me solace. Let me see the face of my grandchild."

Tabassum tried to compose herself and attend to the friends and aquaintainces gathered to condole. She sat listening with glazed eyed to their eulogy of the departed: they praised his melodious voice and the eloquence of his ghazals. Someone had brought a cassette recording of a few of his ghazals and before she could think of an excuse to dissuade them, they had inserted it into the video player and within seconds Ulfat came alive on the screen, his personality exuding that charm and magnetism which had swept her off her feet, and his mellifluous voice which had held thousands

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spellbound filled the room.

As his voice echoed in the room, the years fell back: time stopped. She was back on the night of October twentieth, the year was seventy five—nearly seven years back.

She had been in her final year at Xavier's. She was so excited that evening: she was to attend a ghazal night with Rubina and be introduced to Ulfat Rahi! She had never seen him but had been enchanted by his voice. It was through his soulful renderings that she had been introduced to Ghalib, Mir and Daag which hitherto had been unfamiliar names to her. She developed such a passion for their poetry and had taken up studying Urdu much to the amusement of her parents. Though they did speak Urdu at home their life was very westernised due to their stay abroad,

She had looked pretty in a pale yellow *gharara* suit with her burnished hair cascading on her shoulders. Rubina used to consider it her crowning glory because in the light it gave a halo around her head. Now of course it was limp and lustreless and her once glowing skin was pallid.

Her first glimpse of him had been as they entered the Rangbhavan and Rubina had nudged her gently, saying: "There he is, there, second to the left." And as she looked in that direction her heart had missed a beat: there under a canopy of a starstudded sky amidst a galaxy of poets, staring intently at them, was Ulfat Rahi!

He was extremely thin—emaciated—but the tautness of the frame, the intensity of those dark eyes in that sallow face and the gentle sensitivity of the facial contours imparted a magnetism to his personality and she was helplessly attracted towards him. As he recognised Rubina, who was his friend's sister—he bowed low in *adab*. Ruhina responded with self-conscious grace, whispering: "That's what I like about Ulfat—the style and grace."

She had waited with bated breath for his turn and when it came she wanted it to never end. It was just

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wonderful—his rendering of Ghalib's ghazal "Dil-e nadan tujhe hua kya hai". The crowds swayed to the music and wah-wahed to the lyrics. And when he ended to the tumultuous applause she found that her eyes were moist with tears.

That night when Rubina introduced them it seemed that the world around had ceased to exist. They were only two of them: his eyes like burnt charcoal seem to bore into her, permeating her very being, and she knew from that moment that her life would revolve around him. And Ulfat also responded to her with the same pure fervour and passion. Heavenly days followed—almost—since she was always afraid of her parents' displeasure. They would never have approved of Ulfat. In the circles they moved a man's worth was equated with the wealth and power at his behest and in such a world Ulfat, a simple radio artist, had no place. His talent would never have been appreciated. She knew her father's reaction: "A singer—tch, tch."

Ulfat was aware of the difference in their backgrounds. But he was hopeful of a break in the film world. "Then I will be able to give you all that you are used to—place the whole world before you." And he would break into a ghazal eulogising her beauty and promising everlasting love.

The music had stopped and his image was no longer visible on the screen. There was some commotion around—people were moving about. Her mother-in-law came and sat beside her. "They have released his body," she informed. "*Chote bhai* has taken it to the *kabarstan*. We are all proceeding there. We will bury him after the afternoon prayers."

She bit her lip. Ulfat! Ulfat! She silently wept, her heart writhing with agony. They were going to bury him: place his body under the cold earth. But would the nine feet of earth wipe out from her mind the mingled memories: memories of agony and ecstasy? Memories of a man who could be so wonderful and then turn into a beast under the

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influence of alcohol.

"Tabassum," she heard her mother-in-law plead, "I would request you not to come to the graveyard; it is not good in your condition. You will not be able to bear the sight. . . it is absolutely. . ." She couldn't complete as her voice choked with emotion.

"It's O.K. Ammi, I will not come," Tabassum replied calmly, relieved again. It suddenly occurred to her: If Ulfat had died in those days when she loved him to distraction, she would have gone mad—she couldn't have survived it. Had the transformation inadvertently prepared her to cope with the tragedy? If he hadn't gone this way then some other way. Who can fight destiny?

Everyone except her Chand *khala* left for the last rites. She sat staring blankly at these walls which had been a silent witness to her shattered dreams. Memories flooded her. It was here that she had found Ulfat after five years of painful separation. The years had wrought havoc on him: he was only a husk of the fine man she had left behind. Neither Rubina's letters nor the information provided at the radio station had prepared her for it.

He had blamed her for this transformation, held her responsible for it. Was she to blame for his state? Was it in her hands to stay back when her father had all of a sudden been posted to London? She had refused to go with them and a storm had broken at home: she couldn't at any cost stay back in India. She had been forced to accompany her parents. She tried to explain to Ulfat: make him understand that the separation was temporary and she would be back soon. But he was heartbroken: he had wanted her to run away aud marry him. She had pleaded, tried to make him understand that they could not manage on his salary. She had promised she would be back soon after completing her education. But he was ripped apart with misery: he wouldn't let her go. She had to tear herself from him and for months she was haunted by those

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beseeching eyes.

But she had kept her promise. In spite of the fact that Ulfat didn't respond to her letters she had kept in touch through Rubina. And in spite of pressure she had kept the proposals at bay and completed her education, acquiring a degree in management. In the meanwhile her only link with Ulfat had snapped—Rubina got married and pushed off to the States. Before leaving she had warned her that Ulfat had taken to drinking heavily. She was so upset, she had wanted to dash down to India but love couldn't carry one across the continents: she had to earn enough to reach him.

Her father had been furious and her mother had dissolved into tears when she had informed them of her decision to return to India and settle down with Ulfat. They had tried to dissuade her but she had been adamant. Her father had in a fit of rage disinherited and disowned her. But by then she had earned enough to go back to India and get a job.

But locating Ulfat was not an easy task. He had chucked up his job at the radio station and they knew nothing of his whereabouts. After weeks of relentless searching she had been able to trace him down in this flat. She was appalled to see him: he was a sozzled hollow-eyed mental wreck.

When he saw her standing before him he lurched and then drawled: "So you have come back to see your fine handiwork, Miss England-return? Feel great, don't you?"

She had answered through a haze of tears "I had promised you I will return and I have. How can say all this to me?"

He had laughed a mirthless hollow laugh, swayed his arms in the air and in a slurred tone replied: "It's no use. It's too late. There is no flicker in this mound of ash. Go back to your palatial house and snobbish parents."

She had broken down and through sobs blurted: "I cannot go back. My parents have disowned me! I have

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burnt my boats. There is no going back."

And then suddenly she found herself in his arms and heard him whispering softly: "Don't cry, my love. You don't have to go anywhere. Hush!" Even in that drunken state he had realised the magnitude of her sacrifice.

Their wedding night brought back the old Ulfat. He had come in so quietly behind her and hesitatingly said: "I couldn't buy anything for the *mun-dikhai*."

"Where is the need for it?" she had asked with a smile "This is not the first time you are seeing me."

"This is the first time I am seeing you as my bride. So I thought I shall give you this." And he had taken out the gold medal strung in a gold chain: it was one of those gold medals he had won at a ghazal night.

As he put the chain round her neck their eyes met and she felt the old flame burn within her. When he took her in his arms she murmured: "I am so glad to be back."

He had pressed her close to his chest and whispered, "I will make it up to you. I will never let you regret it." He had tried. For a brief period she had felt that she had snatched back the old Ulfat and they were blissfully happy. But his voice had lost its old magic and he couldn't get the much-longed-for break in the films. He had to make do with a clerical job and singing in the hotels. Embittered and frustrated, he once again took recourse to alcohol. Matters became much worse when she landed an executive post in the airlines. "What a combination we are!" he would say sarcastically. "The hard-headed dashing executive and the failed poet."

"How can you consider yourself to be a failure when you possess the executive. Ulfat, I am the symbol of your success: I have fought with odds to be with you."

This neither cheered, nor convinced him. Bitterly he had replied, "And what have I done in return for it?"

"I don't need anything."

"Actually I cannot give you anything."

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She had tried to make him understand that she didn't crave any material gifts from him: she wanted only his love. But he wouldn't understand. It seemed to burn into him: his failure to provide for her. And the news of her being in the family way added to his despondency. His failure loomed even larger and he dreaded seeing it in his child's eyes. He was back to his drunken days and all his pent-up frustrations he unleashed on her, subjecting her to insane violence.

She couldn't bear it and to protect her unborn child she had left him. Left alone, he seemed to have rushed to his end: dying of cirrhosis at the age of thirty.

"It's three p.m. You must take something," she heard Chand *khala* say as she handed her a bowl of soup.

She eyed the soup with revulsion: the odour was still in her nostrils. Would she ever be rid of it? Would she be able to blot out those nightmarish days and nights, the scars of which were still fresh on her body?

"I can't, *khala*. I feet like throwing up with the stink."

"You must try. Hold your nose and gulp it." She did.

"Na, na, my baby; no, don't cry." Her mother-in-law was trying hard to quieten the child. But the baby kept shrieking: he was hungry. She seemed to have guesed the cause and brought the baby to her saying: "Feed him, he is hungry."

She laid the little bundle beside her. Tabassum gazed fondly at this tiny wizened creature which had entered the world yesterday. She gently gathered him to her and placed her nipple in his mouth. As the body's tiny mouth covered it and sucked it she felt a calm descend over her. She experienced a lightening of heart as the milk flowed from her breasts. The pain seemed to surface and flow out of her.

The smell of milk and the soft baby fragrance mingled in the air and the odour seemed to recede. Or did she

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imagine it? But her body was suffused with the baby's fragrance and warmth. The child opened his dark eyes and watched her with a fixed stare—he had the dark intense eyes of his father.

The years again fell back and Ulfat's mellifluous voice echoed in the air. The words were "Tum khafa ho to mein ajr ko bhi razi kar loon."

She hugged the child and whispered, "You're mine and Ulfat's flesh and blood. You are the little compensation for all the pain and misery. Now that I have you I can forgive and forget those days and remember only those when we were so happy together."

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There is Light at the End of a Tunnel

AZRA PACED RESTLESSLY. HER MIND WAS IN TURMOIL. THE clock on the mantel piece showed six p.m. and at seven sharp Rahat was to call and she had to give her decision: whether she would leave Akhil and join him in Dubai where he had been posted.

Life was indeed strange. Now who would ever have imagined that she who only a year back had been in purdah; who had never spoken to an unrelated man; never exercised her choice in any matter would have to decide: to leave her husband and go away with another man as his wife! Unimaginable indeed!

But then she had come a long way—yes, a very long way since she left the portals of her father's house in Moradabad last summer and entered this huge city with her husband. Bombay! It was a part of India but she had felt as if she had been transported into a different world—a new planet!

Her first impressions of the city had been of horror and and revulsion: at the sight of the teeming crowds; at the srench of slums and shit; the gruesome poverty and the skyscrapers rising to dizzy heights with balconies jutting into the air! But it was her husband's and his friends' attitude which made her absolutely miserable. If the seclusion at home was claustrophobic, the unrestrained and disreputable behaviour of her husband's crowd unhinged her. She felt trapped in an unethical, callous and nightmarish world.

Everything would have been bearable if only Akhil had cared for her. But she had been aware of his preferences

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from the first night: he had made no bones of the fact that she was not his type. He liked the mod city-bred type. He had married her because of parental pressures. Actually he had been forced to and he never concealed this fact. He had taken her without a vestige of love and gentleness, leaving her numb with pain and an emptiness she couldn't fathom.

Night after night she would lie staring at the ceiling, her heart sick with loneliness, listening to the waves crashing on the shores while a storm brewed within her and found no outlet. But he slept on oblivious of her pain and loneliness. Why couldn't he care for her? She had changed: given up the *burqua* and tried to be as modern as possible but it was not enough. She could never blend with his crowds. The parties were a nightmare: the noise, the laughter, the dances and the revelry drove her to despair. She was lonely in the crowds and she was lonely in bed with him.

Akhil of course loved those parties and he drank and flirted atrociously. Rejected and humiliated, she would withdraw to a far corner—cringing from the crowds—to nurse her wounds. But she soon realised that she was observed, that a pair of eyes followed her—eyes which held tenderness and understanding. The pair of eyes belonged to Rahat Kazmi—a colleague of Akhil's. She was deeply disconcerted by those eyes. Why was there so much sympathy in them when her husband's were devoid of it? But then Rahat was different: he was not just a chemical engineer but also a sensitive poet. Perhaps he empathised with her—could understand her loneliness and pain. But he rarely spoke to her except for the exchange of *adabs*, though his eyes never left her, making her acutely conscious of his presence.

Gradually she had become accustomed to it as she had to her husband's neglect. But then suddenly one day an incident changed their lives: it brought the silent gazer into her immediate consciousness.

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It was at the Otters Club where she had accompanied Akhil. While Akhil mixed around and got into the swimming pool she sat and browsed through the magazines. But when she lifted her head from an absorbing story to glance around she was stunned to observe Akhil's blatant familiarity with a sexy bikini-clad girl. Akhil had lifted her in his arms and while the crowd around cheered and she shouted he kept swaying her as if he was going to throw her in the water. Finally to the accompaniment of clappings he dived with her in the pool and emerged with her still in his arms. She was absolutely disgusted and protested as he sauntered back like a conqueror. But he was nettled. He snarled at her, "Why the hell do you keep carping on some healthy fun? You are nothing more than a smalltown glum-faced stick-in-the-mud. And if you cannot be amused with such things you better stay at home. After all, that's what you have been doing all these years."

She had been stung by his words. She had walked out her eyes blinded by tears—not knowing where she went. She had kept walking until a voice from the back stopped her saying, "Let me drop you home." She turned around and discerned through a haze the tall lanky figure of Rahat Azmi. She had wanted to decline but realised she had neither the money to taxi back nor did she know the way. She acquiesced to his request and got into the car. As they drove on something snapped within—maybe his soothing comforting presence was responsible—letting loose all the pent-up emotions, and she sobbed unrestrainedly.

He made no effort to console her and let her cry out her grief unabashedly. It was only as they neared her apartment that he gave her the handkerchief saying in a gentle voice: "No use letting others see your pain." She had looked up through her tears into his limpid eyes as the import of his words sped into her. He was implying that he was not one of the "others". With that one word he had changed the whole equation of their relationship—he had

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added a new dimension to her life. She felt a calm descend over her. In this nightmarish world she was no longer alone.

Yes, that moment onwards her life took a new meaning—something to look forward to—those unforgettable, sweet, cherished moments. But her joy had been adulterated by guilt.

She turned around and glanced at the clock—it was past six-thirty. The sun was about to set and the sky was aflame with a riot of colours which were reflected in the rippling waves. How she would have loved to watch this sunset with Rahat. It was these shared moments that were so ecstatic: they loved nature in all her beauty and glory—they were one of a kind. But all this time she was assailed by deep guilt. Why? They had not indulged in any sin. Just held hands while they watched the sun dip into the Arabian Sea in all its fiery splendour. What would have happened if they had gone further: made love? She would have been drowned in guilt. Guilt not of betraying Akhil who was merrily carrying on with some girl but the guilt inculcated by society in a woman—the price of being a woman. They would consider it a betrayal of womanhood.

This society which never condemned the Akhils of the world would point their fingers at her—brand her a *kulta*. There was only a *kulta*; no male equivalent could be used in its place. Why? Because this society was dominated by men and the only way they could subjugate a woman was to bind her within the four walls of shame, immure her with the burden of guilt.

Should she let this guilt engulf her—destroy her one and only chance of happiness? Give up the chance of being accepted, loved and understood? Had she not yearned for a man with whom she could see the world: understand life? Yes, she had dreamt of a man like Rahat who would take her away from the suffocating life in her father's house. And had he not come into her life when it was the gloomiest,

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sharing her pain and unhappiness?

Then why this hesitation?

But was it so simple: just pick up the suitcase and walk out? She had left her father's house as Akhil's bride. Could she just leave him and go off with another? How was she to face her family? Her parents? And society? But why did she need to bother about society? The *nikah* was a contract between two individuals. Had he kept the terms of the contract? No. But then he had not walked out on her nor threatened to. He denied her no material comforts. He performed his marital duties. They were not on the same wavelength—so different in their outlooks. But then how many couples were on the same wavelength—most couples were just living under the same roof: each an island within. Aad there was no dearth of men who had affairs. But the women didn't walk out on them. There was no precedence in her family. Moreover, would she ever have contemplated leaving Akhil if Rahat had not come along? No. Never. She would have wallowed in misery until Allah in His mercy would have released her.

The clock's arm had crossed seven but the phone didn't ring. She went and checked the dial tone: it was working. Perhaps his phone was out of order. But then he could have rung up from somewhere else. Maybe, she thought, cold fear creeping in, he had developed cold feet. He had weighed the pros and cons and found that he couldn't take such a step: for an eligible bachelor the world lay before him. Why should he wish to be saddled with her? What did she have to offer him? She was, all said and done, only tolerably attractive. He had of course listed many qualities: he had liked her smile, the serenity of her expression, the way she carried herself, and he would add with a twinkle in his eyes—the mole on her upper lip.

But these were not enough—at least not for such a drastic step.

"Perhaps," she thought with a catch in her throat, "this

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was her fate. It at least ended her turmoil. She might just learn to endure this desolate bit of hell. And she sank with with sheer exhaustion on the sofa.

The doorbell rang. She got up with a start. Who could it be? She looked at the clock—it was only seven-thirty. Akhil never returned so early. She got up and cautiously opened the door. She was completely taken a back—it was Rahat!

"You!" She almost shouted with amazement. "What happened? Wasn't your phone working?"

"It is." He looked pale and haggard. Fear gripped her: he had come to regret. She waited with her eyes closed, her breath held for the apology—the explanation.

"I . . . just thought," he was speaking haltingly, "that—in case you have decided to come I should be here with you. I can't leave you to face it alone. I can explain to Akhil."

She released her breath with relief and opening her eyes she looked straight into his limpid eyes. Why had she doubted him? How could he ever fail her? He understood her so well—he could read her mind. It was this complete understanding and sympathy which had drawn her to him. With him beside her she could face the world Her eyes admitted to him this tremendous faith and confidence and he knew the answer.

Together they waited for Akhil to return home.

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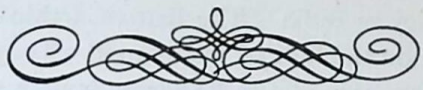
The Winds of Change



"AND THAT'S ALL FROM THE NEWS DESK TONIGHT"—THE NEWS reader's voice brought me with a start from the British period in India to the present times. I put aside the book, eased myself from the sofa where I had been ensconced all evening and moved into an armchair next to my aunt who had been listening to the world news intently. The tense expression on her face was not caused by the disturbing Gulf crisis or by the plight of the people torn apart by the horrendous war; her primary concern at that time was her daughter Salma's absence from the house at this time of the night.

I glanced up at the clock which was ticking away in the drawing room corner, its arms moving towards ten; as soon as it chimed ten, my aunt switched off the T.V. and started pacing restlessly. She came and sat beside me and said anxiously:

"Salma has not yet come back. What will happen now? Shouldn't have allowed her to go."

I didn't speak; she got up and peered out of the window and came back looking worried.

"No sign of her! I shouldn't have let you persuade me into this. What will happen now? What will I tell your uncle when he comes—if this girl does not return before he is here?" Her voice was distraught with fear and anxious apprehension.

Uncle was to arrive by the night flight from Delhi and he would reach home by 11.30 p.m. Salma had told me that she would be home by 11.00 p.m. Of course aunty had

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been told she would be back by ten. I therefore calmly replied, "Aunt, don't worry, she will be back by then. Moreover, Sara is with her." And thus having calmed my aunt, I made my way back to the sofa and concentrated on the British policy in India. The British, I think, are the shrewdest race on the face of this planet. They managed to control a vast country like India through such traps as the Doctrine of Lapse, the Subsidiary Alliance and what have you. We Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, were incapable of such ingenuities—at the least provocation we were up in arms. The Hindus were inspired by the Mahabharata; and the Muslims chanted Quranic verses and declared *jihad* in the name of Allah. In my aunt's house the "generation war" was in full swing between my uncle and Salma, my cousin. My aunt like Kunti was divided between the two.

I had been a witness to this conflict at home—where the battle was carried out in two phases. The first phase was between my sister and father and the subsequent clash between my brother and father; with my father each time symbolising the old concepts and my brother and sister, the new and radical ideas. The clashes reminded me of a very apt observation of André Maurois in *Lelia* which had a profound impact on my mind. It was somewhat in this vein: "The relationship between parents and children is no less difficult. no less fraught with drama, than that between lovers. The growing child, developing into an independent individual, surprises and annoys its parents. What was once a charming plaything becomes almost an adversary." Since I was not personally involved in these conflicts I cannot confirm the veracity of André Mauris statement. I was usually on the fence: preferring to take recourse in history, to the analysis of historical battles, the conflicts of super-egos.

The scenario in my aunt's house was akin to that of a Hindi film. Salma, pretty like any *filmi* heroine, full of fun and laughter, with many friends and admirers; my uncle, tall

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and stern-faced, a stickler for traditional practices—Islamic practices—together with a deep desire to see that his children got modern education; education with tradition was his motto. My aunt, poor thing, was divided between her husband's ideals and her daughter's yearnings. She was at a loss trying to play the role of a devoted wife and an understanding mother simultaneously. My sympathies were all with her. Every morning she had a session each with my uncle and Salma—after both had clashed. She would try to soothe her husband's anger: in turn she was lectured. The lecture invariably ended with the blame squarely on my aunt's shoulders: "You are the one responsible for the girl's behaviour—you have not inculcated in her a pride for the Islamic way of life." The Islamic way of life for my uncle was wearing a *dupatta*; clothes which completely covered the body, no arms or legs should be visible; the clothes should be in drab colours and concealing the contours of the body. It also meant not mixing with boys while studying in a co-ed college!

When my aunt tried to make Salma understand this basic philosophy of my uncle there was an outburst from the girl. "Why did you have to send me to a convent school—why didn't you keep me in purdah? I am the only girl who wears a *dupatta* in my class—I am an utter oddity in my college."

The word "oddity" was a bit far-fetched but I could understand Salma's anguish. In a college like Xavier's where to smoke and drink were the in thing and where the trends in fashion were set—the style of Salma's clothes did attract many comments. Sometimes the boys would tie her *dupatta* to the bench and sing rauciously "Hava may udta jai mera lal *dupatta* mul-mul ka."

With this setting, one would wonder how Salma managed to land at a social and that too a mixed one. Actually what really happened was that my uncle was on tour and we were basking in this relaxed atmosphere; Salma

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announced that Sara, my uncle's best friend's daughter, was attending the college social and she too wanted to attend it. My aunt couldn't believe it. She contacted Sara's mother to confirm if Sara was actually attending the social. When Sara's mother confirmed my aunt was astounded. "Won't there be boys there? I have heard that they dance and a lot of unspeakable things go on. How can you allow Sara to go to such a party?"

Sara's mother replied, "Oh, come on, our daughters are grown up—they are in the final year—they know the facts of life; we can trust them not to do anything improper. After all, they must learn to be on their own. Besides," argued the sensible lady, "the social is within the college precincts and the college faculty will also be there."

My aunt was duly impressed with this line of argument. She consulted me—I felt exalted—and I advised her to allow Salma to attend the social on the clear condition that Sara dropped her home. And thus Salma was permitted to attend the social.

Salma was delighted: she was beside herself with joy and couldn't decide what to wear. She tried the parrot-green *salwar* suit and rejected it: it was too dull—the red *banarasi* sari was too showy and gaudy. I looked askance as the clothes were tossed out of the cupboard—would she ever decide, I thought. Finally she wore my *rani*-coloured sari and black embroidered blouse: she looked lovely in it. Her straight black hair was left open and the light make-up made her look radiant. "Some guy is going to fall for you," I joked. "I hope Javed comes," she sighed. I was a little taken back. "Javed who?" I asked.

"Oh, Javed Hussein," she said. "You have met him."

"They are Shias," I warned her. "Be careful, uncle will never allow it." She didn't answer. And I didn't bother. Javed was at I.I.T. and there was little chance of his being present at the social. Her friendship with him did make me a bit uneasy and I hoped that it wouldn't develop into

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anything serious. My uncle with his rigid ideas would never agree to it. He was a staunch Sunni and the Shias were beyond the pale of his "Islamic traditions".

It was 11.15 and Salma had not returned. My aunt was in a panic. Uncle would be home in a short while. She wrung her hands in despair and reached for the phone. I stopped her though I too felt nervous. "Wait for a few minutes, aunt," I implored.

Suddenly a taxi stopped. My heart stopped beating. It was Salma: not with Sara but with Javed! Oh God, I thought, if uncle comes now the heavens will fall. This girl is the limit! Javed left her till the door and went away in the taxi. His taxi had just turned the corner when my uncle's taxi stopped outside the building. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Aunt," I said. "Thank God Salma has returned, if only a few seconds before uncle. The great thing is he did not see her."

My aunt raised her hands in a thanksgiving gesture. She was so overcome with relief that she didn't enquire anything and I imparted nothing. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that she had come with Javed. For the life of me I couldn't understand how she had the guts to do so.

Salma came in running breathless and before she could utter a word I took her to my room and shut the door. Her eyes were shining and her face flushed with excitement. I asked in a threatening whisper, "Why did you come with Javed and not with Sara? Did you want to cause a gory slaughter here?"

"Oh, Appi, don't be angry. Oh I am so excited! You know, Javed and I left the party early—we were together. Can you believe it, Appi, Javed loves me; he wants to marry me!"

Good God, I thought. Now we are in for a battle proper. And I wondered as I heard my uncle's booming voice in the corridor—what role was I going to play now?

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Echoes from the Past

THE HORSE TROTTED SLOWLY THROUGH THE CONGESTED LANES of the bazaar in spite of the whippings from the tonga-wallah followed by the contemptuous rebuke of "Eh ghoday!" (You horse!) I couldn't comprehend the purpose in lashing the horse for there was no way he could have increased his speed through the crowded lanes. Nor could I see any sense in reminding him of his animal status. Could this houyhnhnm understand the language of this yahoo, I wondered. But it was too much to ponder: my senses were assailed by the smells and sounds of a small-town bazaar. The aroma of cooked food and ripe fruit mingled with the pungent smells of marigolds and the fragrance of the *mogras*, roses and jasmines and the stench of the gutters. The tinkling of bycycle bells, the hooting of auto-rickshaws, the yells of the tonga and riksha-wallahs, the calls of the hawkers and the chatter of crowds made me feel dizzy.

With dazed eyes I looked around the scenes which I had completely forgotten during my stay abroad. It was quite some time before I realised that Rasheed *miyan*, the old retainer of my grandmother's family, who was sitting next to the tonga-wallah, had been speaking.

"All this," he was saying with outstretched hand taking nearly half the bazaar in its sweep, "belonged to us, *bibi*. But of course," he added, seeing the bewildered expression in my eyes, "there was no bazaar here. Only green fields as far as the eye could see. It was part of the two dozen villages which belonged to the Khan-bahadur." His eighty year old frame ensconced in a pre-war *sherwani* and an

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equally old fez cap had been through better days. His fading vision had seen so much: not only three generations but a whole way of life which was no more.

The Khan-bahadur was my maternal grandmother's uncle. He had been the head of a household which inhabited the two *havelis* consisting of nearly a hundred inmates. Today only my mother's aunt, a widow of the Khan-bahadur's son lived there. Of course Rasheed *miyan* and his wife too were there but the other members had gradually migrated to the towns and cities and from thence gone off abroad. Very few visited her since the *havelis* were situated in the interior, unconnected by rail or air. I had however made up my mind to visit her before returning to the U. S. A.

"How is Nusrat *khala*?" I inquired as we moved out of the bustling bazaar into the open countryside.

"She is as one would be at her age and in her condition. The children she adopted have got completely absorbed in their lives and hardly ever visit her. Such is life!" Rasheed *miyan* let out another sigh.

Nusrat *khala*, my mother's maternal aunt, had been married at the age of fourteen to her already married cousin, in order to provide him with an issue. I had heard mummy relate the shock they had when they saw their doll-like aunt get married to the aged and hefty but goodlooking uncle. Asad uncle had been at least twenty years older to her. Everyone realised the clear injustice of it but none dared to protest. The Khan-bahadurs orders carried the force of a law.

By now the tonga was jogging briskly on a narrow path amidst green fields. Time seemed to have stood still in this part of the world: the men still ploughed with oxen and the women still cooked on cowdung cakes.

"That is the *quila*." Rasheed *miyan* pointed towards a reddish brown ramshackle structure, looming ahead and emerging out of the green fields.

We had to cross the moat to go inside to the *havelis*. The moat we crossed was only a dry ditch and we were

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inside in a few minutes. I held my breath at the moving sight: a strange mixture of pulchritude and desolation. The crumbling walls of the *havelis* were submerged under rapacious creepers, the vast grounds were covered by a forest of weeds and wild plants; the *dhatura*, the *akk* and the ipomoea grew everywhere—under the spreading mango trees, neem and tamarind trees and even through the broken graves. It was truly a triumph of nature over man-made structures.

Here in these *havelis*—built around the year of the Mutiny—nearly six generations of my mother's maternal ancestors had lived and died. These two *havelis* and the surrounding land was perhaps the only world the women of the family knew: they were born, brought up, married to their cousins and buried in the grounds around the *haveli*. My grandmother and her cousin Qamar were the first to be married out: the rest had been married to their cousins within the *havelis* or between the two *havelis*—the smaller one belonged to the Khan-bahadur's cousin.

We paid off the tonga-wallah and stepped cautiously, picking our way through the briars and nettles, but as we turned a corner a bewitching sight came in view: a small mound covered with a cluster of frangipani and *chandni* trees with their milky white flowers gleaming against the sky.

"Those trees," explained Rasheed *miyan* catching the direction of my gaze, "were planted by Salma *bibi* before she got married."

Salma was my mother's cousin who had been married to a doctor in the States and had settled down there after her marriage.

"Salma *bibi* was here last year with her daughters." Rasheed *miyan* stressed "her daughters" and looked away. The teenaged girls had created quite a furore with their cropped hair, tight jeans and tops, and their American accents. Salma had brought them down to acquaint them with their roots: to introduce them to their glorious past. The girls had been suitably impressed and for days they

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regaled their American friends with tales of their aristocratic ancestors. I wondered whether they ever understood leave alone empathise with the cloistered lives of the women who lay buried within the precincts. Or the woman who passed her lonely days amidst the ruins.

We were now inside an enclosed courtyard with a verandah running around and a neem tree in the centre, its spreading branches shading a dry pond.

"This was the zenana." Rasheed *miyan's* voice was wistful and his eyes held a faraway look.

I gazed solemnly at the crumbling walls of what might have been a haven to the women folk—the only place they could call their own; a place in which they had the freedom to laugh and enjoy and do as they pleased. Then this soundless, desolate place must have been alive with the peals of laughter of the young girls, with the chatter of the maids, sounds of pounding of the pestle on grain, the cackle of the nutcracker as the bejewelled begums prepared *paan* for their sahabs. It must have echoed with the melodious voices of the young girls reciting couplets of all the famous poets as they held *antakshiris*. Though denied formal education my grandmother and her cousins could recite couplets of all the poets: Ghalib, Mir, Sauda, Daag and Zauq; and though their movements was restricted their minds roamed free in the realms of Firdausi's *Shahnama* and Saadi's *Gulistan*.

"What is it, *bibi*? You seem to be lost." I heard Rasheed *miyan's* voice and came back to the ravaged silent present.

We moved out of the courtyard and I beheld the first signs of human habitation in the ruins: the flutter of curtains and smoke emanating out of a repaired structure. From one of the green curtained doors Nusrat *khala* made her appearance. She was a mellowed and aged version of Meena Kumari—the Meena Kumari of *Mere Apne*. She had the same soft features, the same wavy hair and sad eyes of the tragic queen. And like her she was childless though she

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had hankered for a child. She came forward to receive me, carrying her eighty years with grace.

As she embraced me, the pent up bitterness and pain gushed from my aching heart and tears flowed from my eyes. "Come, child. Come, learn to bear it," she said gently caressing my hair.

She took me inside and sat me down on a low divan. "How you have changed! I could hardly recognise you."

"I have been through a lot, Nusrat *khala*," I said, suppressing a rising sob.

"I know. Your mother wrote to me. Wherever we are—suffering is there. See, it is inherent in the human condition." She gave a sigh. "But one must learn to live with it. Come, wash up, while I get some refreshments. I have put you in the room which belonged to Qamar."

She led me inside a large room which was bare except for a four-poster bed. I surveyed the rundown room with plaster peeling everywhere and asked with astonishment: "This was Qamar *khala's* room?"

"Yes; but then it was very different: all carpeted and cushioned with a silver bed with a mosquito net with gold threads and a dressing table laden with bottles of gold dust and perfumes."

Qamar, my grandmother's cousin, was the only daughter of the Khan-bahadur. A girl of incomparable beauty, matchless wit and charm, she had been brought up in the lap of luxury. She had never set her feet on the bare floor. The Khan-bahadur had her engaged at the age of fourteen to his brother's son, the lighteyed and handsome Imtiaz. With the passing of years they had fallen irrevocably in love and not a day passed when they did not exchange love-notes in the guise of couplets from the renowned poets. But when Qamar was nineteen the Khan-bahadur had an altercation with Imtiaz's father and broke up the engagement. Amidst protestations from the unfortunate pair and heartbroken sobs from Qamar she was forcibly married to an uneducated and

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uncouth country boor. She spent her life shedding tears, in poverty and need. This room had been a witness to it all: both her agony and ecstasy (in the reverse order).

After a wash, I walked into the courtyard where Nusrat *khala* and tea were awaiting me. By now the sun was about to dip behind a grove of mango trees and the horizon was flushed with a rosy glow. A flight of sparrows was returning home to their nests in the ruins.

We sat quietly drinking tea, lost in our thoughts. The darkness gathered around us and as we sat amidst the ruins set in the wilderness, far away from human inhabitation, my gaze fell on the graves and I felt an eerie sensation.

"The dead never come back," I heard Nusrat *khala* say. She had seen my fearful gaze. "Only memories do."

"Are the memories happy?" I asked. My memories of Zia my dead husband were far from happy: they were bitter and painful. I had never come to terms with his infidelities. Even his death a few months ago had not erased the anguish: he had died in an accident with his mulatto girl friend.

"Memories are both happy and sad," she said.

"Were yours happy?" I asked. I had always wanted to know how she had been able to accept the presence of another woman.

"Most of them."

"Most?" I repeated. "How did you reconcile yourself to the other woman in his life? I could never do so."

"She was his wife, not another woman."

But how did one accept it? Would I have accepted it if the other woman had been a wife rather than a girl-friend? No, never. I could never shared my husband.

"Did you love him very much?" I inquired.

Nusrat *khala* shrugged her shoulders and said with a sigh: "He was my husband and she was kind and affectionate. He was very indulgent. He had a voice like Saigal and sang to me often."

"But he never gave you a child."

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"He couldn't. It was not in his hands. So why hold it against him."

Perhaps that is the difference, I thought. Zia didn't wish to give me a child. It would have interfered with his libertine lifestyle. "Damn him," I cursed loudly.

"No, Kulsum. No," she said taking my hands in hers. "Don't let bitterness destroy your life. You are young and better placed than Qamar and me. We could hardly leave the four walls and fend for ourselves. You can. Why let the past come in the way?"

"Yes. But where is the guarantee that other men would be any better?"

"Why do you wish to make man the pivot of your life?" she asked. I just stared at her. I didn't know what to say. It sounded so strange coming from her—a woman who had spent her entire life isolated from the outside world could imagine a life without a husband and child!

"Of course if you meet someone good then by all means start a new life. But if not you should not consider that home and husband are all of life."

"I could adopt a child," I said. "But supposing they left me and went away. . . ,"

"So what? Everything in life is transient. The joy is in the moment and in giving. Why must one cling to anything? Look at those *chandni* trees. Salma had planted them. She enjoyed doing this. Today she can't see their beauty but that has not dimnished her happiness. She does not regret planting. They still are a beautiful sight."

"Yes, but it is difficult. . ."

"True. But then in the longer run it is better. Leaves you more contented—a happier person."

I looked at her serene face and realised she was at peace after suffering so much. She had wanted and desired nothing for herself, savoured the moment of giving and therefore had no rancour. I looked around. The night had deepend around us but the sky was studded with stars.

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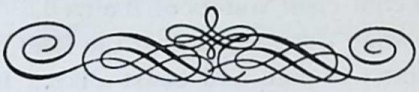
My Grandfather's House



IT WAS NOT THE HOUSE MY GRANDFATHER BUILT, IT WAS A house he bought from a Marwari and improvised upon. It was an unusual house: an old edifice with cobbled roof and arches together with a modern superstructure—a delightful combination of the old and the modern, an amalgam of the Hindu and Muslim. It was one of the first double-storeyed houses in the district and all you needed to tell the friendly tonga-wallah by way of address was: "Take me to the house," and lo and behold, you were at my grandfather's house.

To us children who regularly visited it every summer, it was the ultimate in joy and desire. The portico was covered with mauve and red bougainvillaea and there was a *mandvah* of *mogras* and *belia gulabs*—roses which grew on creepers! There were fruit trees: guavas, mangoes, white tamarind and yes, believe it or not, *sitaphal* (local name for the custard apple) and *ramphal* trees. My heart is numb with fear: what with *ramphal* and *sitaphal* trees, a huge pipal tree with a well below it and the house of a Hindu converted into a Muslim abode! Oh dear, save this place. But no fears: the sale deed lies safely embedded in my grandfather's sale.

But the Marwari rued the day he sold the auspicious house to my grandfather and it is said that till this day one can hear his ghostly heartbroken cries near the *hamam*.

Indeed, for some time even we believed it to be unusually auspicious: all my aunts' *dolis* and my mother's too had departed from this house. And prosperity poured in: the godowns were full with grain and the embedded safe

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stuffed with notes, as my grandfather, a criminal lawyer, won one case after another.

The Marwari's contention was that this luck was caused by the blessings of the giant pipal tree whose branches were reflected in the cool clear waters of the well. The well was also a miracle: when drought stalked the land, its waters quenched the thirst of man and beast alike. It was a sight worth filming: the sexy local women in *kashtas* delicately balancing pots on their heads, their hips swaying gracefully.

Of course, now with the municipal pipes having reached all, we are deprived of such delectable sights.

Besides the fruit trees, my aunt had planted lemon and pomegranate trees. The pomegranate trees were just outside the old-style box toilets. While the pigs gorged on our droppings in the boxes below, we who had no sense of hygiene, sat and munched pomegranate seeds above. And the lemon trees produced such an abundant harvest of the yellow fruit that we could have easily run a *nimbu-pani* stall and earned a neat income.

These were not the only attractions: there was my loving affectionate grandmother and my lovely petite aunt with her auburn hair and laughing black eyes; and there was my *mama*, as handsome as Clark Gable and who entertained in as lavish a style as the old nawabs.

With the house, there were the servants; Bina-*bi*, a cranky shrivelled 80: Hussein *miyan*, a crazy, dotty chap in his forties: and Murtuza, a hapless and bewildered bastard in his teens. Poor chap, he was constantly taunted by Bina-*bi* on his parentage. Bina-*bi* was quite a woman or must have been in the prime of her youth. Her dress was a fashion designer's dream: she wore a *choli* tied in a knot in the front, and below, instead of a billowing skirt, a clinging *churidar* with a *dupatta* draped around. At that age her sagging breasts, which reminded me of dried figs, were repulsive, but in her youth she must have been irresistible.

"That I was," confirmed Bina-*bi*. "How else could I have

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kept my husband away from those Banjara women floating around?"

"Are the Banjara women very beautiful?" we enquired, out of sheer curiosity.

"Oh yes, my dearies. They are the most seductive sorceresses one ever saw in their backless mirror-work *cholis*."

Hussein *miyan* was an institution: about him there were several stories. He claimed to have mastered witchcraft—*jadu tona*. He hadn't married, but then he didn't need to: he had a *mantar* by which any of the *paris* would spend the night with him whenever he desired! There was the *lal pari* and the *saphed pari* and the *sabz pari*. All he had to do was to apply the right perfume and stand on one foot with one eye open for three hours. We were fascinated by these stories and eager to have a glinpse of the *paris*, but he would never allow us in the hut. Once, with great difficulty, we managed to peer into the hut, but from the height of the mango tree and the precarious position on the swaying branches, all that one could discern was Hussein *miyan* and someone who resembled the *dhoban's* daughter.

But the most memorable days were those when my aunts got married. The whole place was lit up and decorated like a Christmas tree. Everywhere there were relatives and friends floating about, and the air was heavy with the aroma of delicious food. My uncle in a white suit seemed more handsome than any movie actor. I was also fully decked up: a plump six year old in a *gharara*, rolling about looking important.

There was an uproar outside: shouts of "The *baaraat* has come, the *baaraat* has come" rent the air. The band marched along, playing some raucous *filmi* song which I can't remember. Anyway, that was hardly important. What was was my first glimpse of the bridegroom. So hold your breath while I give a firsthand account of it.

The car glided into the portico and everybody rushed to

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open the door. I peered through the tangle of legs and arms. Out stepped a suited elephant—I mean a man who resembled . . . no, what I mean is a man who was as huge as an elephant!

Everyone was trying to shake hands with him. My uncle garlanded him. Why? He surely couldn't be the bridegroom. I nudged my smiling uncle. "Where is the bridegroom?" I whispered. He gave me a scathing look and in an acerbic voice asked sarcastically, "Can't see? Need specs?"

I was absolutely flabbergasted. I rushed into the house to give this horrifying news, but stopped short, aghast when I heard my aunt, who was coyly peeping out of the window with her friends, chirp: "Doesn't Amin look handsome?" The girls giggled and one said, "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder." Did it, I wondered. Something must be wrong with her eyes.

Anyway, she was exceedingly happy. I just couldn't comprehend it. Many years later, when I realised the full significance of marriage and what it entailed, I couldn't help marvelling at the skill and dexterity of my uncle. To make love to a woman one-fourth his size without quashing her under his weight!

Actually, all this realisation dawned upon me when my youngest aunt Shagufta—the pretty one with the auburn hair—got married. It was about midnight, three days after the wedding. I was descending the stairs to attend to Nature's call when I heard my mother speaking in an agitated voice to my aunt's mother-in-law. "How come nothing has happened until now?"

"Don't worry," explained my aunt's mother-in-law. "Everything will be alright. It didn't happen in my case too—for nearly 15 days. Every time he would come near me, I would start shouting and he would withdraw, fearing he would awaken the whole house," she giggled. My mother and grandaunt didn't. They were not amused.

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They refused to believe that such reticence and control were inherited. Pointed questions were put and an ultimatum was given. The deed should be performed that night. And it was! What a shining example of filial obedience!

These nocturnal visits of mine were both enlightening and educative. One midnight as I was descending the stairs, I saw a light in my grandfather's room and heard a woman's voice. I stopped in my tracks. I tiptoed towards the room and peered through the chinks in the door. Lo and behold! The scene was worth picturising. There was my splendid grandfather, a fine figure of a man—as fine as a man can be in his sixties—with a hoary moustache which curled upwards menacingly, and my grandaunt Nafisa *begum*, stout, short, sixtyish, with bull eyes, plumply seated in the armchair. My grandfather was waxing eloquent about those eyes: "Nafisa *begum*, what eyes you have and what a body! Taj *miyan* never appreciated you." I couldn't see her body—she was swathed in five yards of thick white cotton. What was he talking about? Perhaps the past. I was stunned. Good God! To have seen the body of his brother's wife! The words from the Bible or some holy scripture flashed before my horrified eyes! Oh God, I prayed, forgive them. Let the sins of the grandfather not visit his grandchildren. All is not well in this house . . . I moaned.

And then for days I went about with a haunted look. I walked around like a zombie. No, like Hamlet, after he had come to know the heinous truth. Wasn't my plight the same? I thought it was.

"What's the matter, Ayesha? Have you seen a ghost?" Just like my mother to notice when I am disturbed. And of course she could attribute it to no other reason than ghosts. My mother was obsessed with ghosts. The house she was born in—her grandfather's house—was infested with ghosts and jinns, they were everywhere, performing all activities from bathing and washing to multiplying. I sometimes felt like asking her if she had seen the jinns

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copulating. But I didn't dare. So how could I now divulge this terrible secret of her father? Would my mother believe it? Would she weep for her dead mother? My poor, poor grandmother! She must be turning in her grave. I loved her: she was a sweet, gentle lady. Tears sprang to my eyes.

"Why are you crying my baby? What is the matter, my child?" my mother asked in a concerned voice. I was 14 and not only did my bodice indicate it, but I was also aware of the perfidy of my grandfather, and I didn't like being called a child. I was stung: I blurted out all that I had seen and heard. To my horror, my mother, instead of being shocked, was chuckling!

"Oh Ayesha, oh!" she chided with amusement. "Has this been bothering you—all these days?"

"What's so funny?" I asked indignantly, seeing no occasion or reason for such mirth. She was so strict with us. We had to cover the *dupatta* over our lemon-sized breasts and were chided if we let it slip. And here she was, amused! "In your days, did women go about showing their bodies?"

"Oh no! I was only amused at Abba's English. What he meant was 'figure'. Ha! ha!" she laughed.

"Oh-ho," I said, as realisation dawned on me. "But then in those days women wore loose *kurtas* over their saris. So how was it possible to notice the figure?" I wasn't going let go so easily. I had decided to find the truth—the complete truth.

"Yes, all women in the house wore either *kurtas* or loose home-made blouses. But Nafisa *chachi* was a different breed —she was from Bombay. She wore tailored, well-fitting blouses. And she wore nylon saris. Sometimes, no, most of the time, the *pallav* slipped and we had a glimpse of her. . ." she giggled and added, "well-fitting blouses."

So this *pallav*-dropping was an old trick—probably the most oft-used weapon in the limited arsenal of the traditional woman!

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"How sexy!" I exclaimed, completely overwhelmed by this disclosure of my venerated grandaunt.

"Don't use such language," scolded my mother. "And wear your *dupatta* properly." She was back into her role of reprimanding me. I scowled fiercely at this silly double standard—this blatant hypocrisy. But then old habits die hard. I adjusted my *dupatta* without a murmur.

And I could go on and on, narrating all the discoveries and revelations of the old and the middle-aged and the young. Every nook and corner of the house abounds with memories. It was a miniature word. . . . But I am overwhelmed with sentiment.

My grandfather's house stands deserted: it is only an abode of memories. My aunts are married and gone away to far-off lands. My grandfather and my devastatingly goodlooking *mama* are no more. The servants, Bina-*bi* and Hussein *miyan*, are dead and Murtuza has wandered off to no one knows where, hopefully to a place where none can taunt him about his birth.

Though the trees—the pipal and the lemon and the pomegranate—still stand there, they are old and withered. No cows moo and no chickens cluck in the barn. The courtyard is overgrown, but the bougainvillaea and *mogras* still bloom. The old Marwari still weeps in the spooky and moss-covered *hamam*—but there is no one to hear his cries.

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The New Horizon

WITH A START SAIRA AWAKE TO THE CALL OF THE MUEZZIN. Today of all the days, she must not forget her prayers. She thanked the Almighty in *sijda* for having realised her dream to make Arshad a doctor.

It had been Adil's wish. His last letter from Dubai had been full of it. He felt life as a doctor in the villages of India —serving the poor and needy—was more worthwhile than the materialistic existence in Dubai. At least his son would live the life he had visualised but which the constraints of fortune had not allowed him.

Yes, that had been his last letter written just two days before his death in a road accident.

At twenty her world had been shattered. She was left a widow with a year old son, a hapless mother with very little money to see them through. Since Adil had married her against his parents' wishes she couldn't expect anything from them.

"Morning, Ma!" Arshad entered with a beaming smile—that endearing smile of Adil! He was Adil's replica. The same soft brown eyes and burnished hair which gleamed in the sunlight.

"*Asolam alaikum betay*," she said a little perturbed that Adil never bothered to keep up their customary greetings which she so assiduously tried to imbibe in him.

"You should have said your prayers today," she rebuked. He responded with a grin.

"Ma, are you only going to rebuke me or going to give me some tea? I have to be on morning duty and also be

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ready for the convocation in the evening. Can you believe it? Your son will be Dr. Arshad then. Feel proud, Ma?"

Saira glowed with pride. "Yes, my son," she said, handing him the tea cup.

As he took it, she had a glimpse of that ugly scar, and as usual, a stab of pain passed through her.

How often she had winced with pain of the sight of that scar, but today it triggered off painful memories.

"My poor darling child," she murmured, as she remembered the incident, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Arshad was gulping the tea, impervious of her emotion. He was, as usual, in a hurry to attend the hospital.

"Bye, Ma. See you in the evening. Be at your best. Wear that Kanjeevaram I brought for you, O.K.?"

Smiling through the tears, she said, "I will dress well but the Kanjeevaram I am going to wear only on one occasion and now that . . ."

"Oh, there we go again! Right, on my wedding. I have to rush. Bye, Ma."

"Khuda Hafiz," she said.

It seemed that he had forgotten that incident when his hand had been burnt so brutally. But she could never forget. How had it all started?

Yes, it had been in winter. An icy wind had been blowing outside, her mother had been coughing incessantly inside.

She was trying to put little Arshad to sleep and Taibah *khala* who had been visiting them had given that ill-fated proposal. She had been completely taken aback and had protested vehemently when her mother requested her to consider the offer.

She had pleaded as usual, what would happen to her and the child when she was no more? Taibah *khala* had become more persuasive. She had stressed the need of a father for Arshad.

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"A child needs a father and mother. He is young and will accept this. A couple of years more and it will be too late. Moreover, it is not easy to manage a growing boy. And can you with your teacher's salary really realise your husband's ambition to make him a doctor?"

With this she had clinched the argument. Saira had nothing to say further. It was for this that she lived. And though she could never have imagined any other man in Adil's place, she had consented to marry Jaleel Kazi, a widower with two children aged six and eight .

But whar a mistake it had been! She shuddered as she remembered those dreadful days First of all, a woman should never marry one man when she still loves another. Yes, she had never forgotten Adil. Their brief marriage had been idyllic. Perhaps the brevity had been a safeguard against disillusionment.

Whatever the reason, the fragrance of those days was still fresh in her memory, and she remembered them more keenly when she was with Jaleel.

She was always consciously comparing. His touch, his caress was sheer agony. It brought memories of Adil's caresses and she froze in his arms.

Did he realise it? Of course he did. A dog can, so why can't a man? And specially when the motivation for marrying her was not providing a mother to his children but because he was smitten by her prettiness?

He had seen her at the school were she taught and vowed to marry her. The frenzy of his jealousy was now directed at the child who resembled the dead man he detested. He was always looking for excuses to punish him.

It became a daily affair for her two stepsons Ali and Nisar to pick a fight with Arshad for which he was invariably blamed, spanked and sent hungry to bed. Her heart bled for her child but she was helpless. What could she do? Where could she go? Her mother had expired and she had

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no one to turn to.

But one day she could no longer control herself. It had reached a point of no return. She remembered that day so clearly.

She had been getting ready for school when she heard Arshad's heart-rending scream from the kitchen. She rushed there and found that her husband had burnt the child's hand as a deterrent against hitting Ali. She had never believed that he was capable of such cruelty.

In a split second she decided No matter what, she would leave his house forever. She had rushed to the hospital and never returned to Jaleel Kazi after that. As she couldn't give him "*talaq*" (divorce) which was his prerogative, she took a "*khalu*" (legal separation) forgoing her "*mehr*" (sum of money in consideration of marriage).

The drawing-room clock chimed six and with a start she realised that she had to be at the convocation in an hour's time. In a mad rush she draped the green silk which Adil had presented her 20 years back. Powdering her face, she took a last quick look at herself in the mirror.

The reflection was indeed complimentary. In spite of the streaks of gray, she didn't look much older than the day Adil had taken her out in the same sari to the Ritz.

"Oh Adil, how I wish you were here today!" The tears rolled down her cheeks but quickly wiping them away, she rushed to the convocation hall.

She was in time: the convocation has just commenced. Her heart glowed with pride and joy as Arshad ascended the stairs to take his degree. Tears again flowed—tears of joy.

Outside Arshad hugged her. "Ma, you look lovely. I am glad you wore this sari and not those awful whites."

"Congratulations, Saira." A voice came from behind. It was a familiar voice, a voice she detested. It was the voice of Jaleel Kazi.

She swung round and with shocked eyes looked at

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Jaleel after 15 years. He had completely grayed and had become shrunken and pale. Time had not treated him kindly.

"Congratulationes," he repeated. "Your son has become a doctor." She looked at Arshad who was watching nonchalantly. Should she introduce him or not? Jaleel came to her rescue with a smile. "We have met."

Arshad didn't acknowledge this. Saira was startled at the strange turn of events. How did Jaleel and Arshad meet? Did Arshad recognise Jaleel?

Jaleel was speaking again. He was telling her how Arshad had saved Nisar's life some days back when he had been badly injured in an accident. It was Arshad's presence of mind that had saved his son.

"I must thank you, Saira, for you have made your son a noble doctor." He turned to Arshad. "Son, you went away that day before I could thank you. Today, I want not only to thank you but also beg forgiveness for. . . ."

Before Jaleel could finish, Arshad said gruffly, "It's O.K. I was only doing my duty," and quickly walked away.

A bewildered Saira hastily excused herself and tried to catch up with her son who was striding ahead briskly. His behaviour was inexplicable. Did he know the identity of the man?

"Arshad!" she called out breathlessly. "Wait for me, son."

He slowed down till she caught up with him but he was silent, withdrawn, so she too didn't broach the topic. But, as soon as they were home, she asked, "Arshad, did you know that the gentleman was your stepfather?"

"Yes, Ma, and I also recognised Nisar when they brought him in bleeding." He paused for a while and then continued, "I want to confess, Ma, that for a moment I was blinded by an overpowering desire for revenge. It was so easy. I could just allow him to bleed to death. No one

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would know. I was alone on duty. But this was only for a moment, for the very next instant I realised the gravity of the responsibility which we shouldered. I cannot use my knowledge—the knowledge to save lives—to wreak revenge. A man goes to a doctor in the throes of pain, with hope and faith, and places his life in his hands. And I wanted to make use of it for vengeance! For personal vendetta! I couldn't do it. I did my best and he was saved by the grace of God!"

Saira cried with joy, "*Shabash*, my son! Today you have become a doctor in the true sense of the word. You have broken the shackles of revenge and bitterness. I am proud of you."

She moved towards the window and flung it open. It was a glorious night. The moon shone like a silver ball amidst a thousand stars and a fragrant wind blew in.

Through the bright moonlit night she could see a new and bright horizon—a horizon without the bitterness of the the past. It had only a glorious future.

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A Little Understaneing Goes a Long Way

"NOW, SHAGUFTA," I HEARD MY MOTHER TELL MY AUNT, "YOU can sleep in peace."

"Uhun," muttered my aunt and gave a sigh of relief. "A great responsibility is over."

"Does marrying a daughter end the responsibility, aunt?" I asked.

"Oh no!" my mother exclaimed. "Now you please don't start your feminist talk."

"It's not feminist talk, mummy." I insisted on putting forth my view. "Reshma and the boy had not even seen each other till after the *nikah*. He is here for a fortnight and will then push off to Dubai. I do not know when Reshma will be joining him. What do you think is in store for her?"

"Oh, good God!" exclaimed my aunt, exasperated. While people were congratulnting her on the good match she had got for Reshma, I was as usual not only making vague feminist statements but also concocting fears and pointless apprehensions.

"My dear niece," she said in the most sugary voice she could summon, "why do you not understand the simple thing—that marriage is luck? You can never be too sure even if you know the person inside out. You may still be in for a shock. In marriage is no guarantee. It is best left to God."

"Well said," interjected my grandaunt Mohsina. "We have seen life, dear child. Now just take the case of your

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Amina *khala*: she got married to her cousin—mind you, her first cousin—and can you believe it? Sadat *miyan* used to have relations with the maidservant! And do you know. . .?"

I gave up, pulled the quilt over my ears and decided to call it a day. While my aunts and mother continued to gossip, my thoughts went to Reshma, who was nearly five years younger to me.

Poor girl, she was just out of college: she had never mixed with boys and all her knowledge of love and romance was based on Mills & Boon novels and Hindi films. The discipline at home was so strict that she was not even permitted to speak to her male cousins.

I remembered a funny incident which my brother Aziz had narrated when he returned from a visit to my aunt. He had been chatting with Reshma in the drawing-room. My aunt kept hovering menacingly around. The bell rang and he moved out to answer the door. When he returned, my aunt was sitling in Reshma's chair after having sent the girl inside.

And here she was about to commit the most intimate act with a total stranger! How would she respond to him? What were her feelings, her thoughts, when the door of their bedroom was closed by him and the whole familiar world was shut out?

These questions confounded me and I could not sleep till late in the night.

It was broad daylight when my aunt shook me awake. "Get up now. Do you know the time?"

I stretched and yawned. Mohsina *khala* said: "It is 10 a.m. You and I have to fetch Reshma from her bridegroom's place. What must her in-laws think? She needs a bath and a change. . ."

"Uhun," I muttered. "She had better get used to that condition. She is going to be in it very often."

"Come on, hurry up and stop talking nonsense."

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chided Mohsina *khala*.

By the time we reached Reshma's house I was in an unabated state of excitement. I was eager to see the transformation. Would there be the glow of the newly awakened? How would she meet us after the event: warm and radiant or just plain indifferent?

As far as I knew Reshma, she would put on an air of nonchalance and remark: "If you are so curious to know, get married yourself."

As the car glided into the portico, Asim's brother Rabat came out to receive us. He seemed a bit pale. He greeting was formal and manner withdrawn.

We were led into the drawing-room where Anisa Begum, Reshma's mother-in-law, received us with a sombre face. Mohsina *khala* and I exchanged glances. Mohsina *khala* put up a cheerful visage and asked, "And how is our *dulhan*?"

Anisa Begum gave a watery smile and said: "You can ask her."

We went into Reshma's bedroom. It was done up lavishly—the bridal bed bedecked with *mogra* flowers, the velvet quilt laced with gold border and the mosquito net studded with gold threads and sequins. But Reshma was lying with her face on the pillow—sobbing.

I rushed to her. "Reshma! Reshma, what is the matter?"

She neither lifted her head nor replied but continued to sob into the pillow. Mohsina *khala* went to her and bending over, she gently stroked her hair, saying softly, "Hush, child. We are in your *susral*. What will they say? Calm down. Control yourself." But Reshma didn't heed her and continued to sob uncontrollably.

"Come, let's go home. Zohra, pack her wedding dress."

"I don't wish to take that dress," Reshma shouted between sobs.

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Mohsina *khala* made a sign to me to carry on without paying heed to her. I folded the red and gold *gharara* suit and put it in the vanity case. The *odni* with its gold tassels and sequins had a tear!

In the meantime, Mohsina *khala* had managed to calm her.

As we went out of the house, Mohsina *khala* inquired: "Where is *dulha mian?*"

"Yes, where?" I inquired. "We would like to take his permission before we take his. . ." There was a nudge from Reshma and a suppressed, "Shut up!"

"He is in the verandah," said Anisa Begum. "And if you wish, you may speak to him."

Since Reshma showed no inclination, I went alone. Asim was lounging in the cane chair—his handsome face wore a scowl. Hearing footsteps he turned and said politely, "*Adab arz.*"

"*Adab arz*, bhai," I chirped. "We have come to take your bride. Is permission granted?"

He nodded and abruptly turned away. I shrugged my shoulders for I couldn't figure out what had happened. The whole set-up seemed to be in a bad mood.

On the way back Reshma again commenced her crying. Mohsina *khala* said, "Now, my child, tell us exactly why you are unhappy. Have they insulted our family or spoken disparagingly about the *jahez*?"

Reshma shook her head.

"Has he got a mistress or wife in Dubai?" I asked, convinced that he must have confided about his shady past and poor Reshma was heartbroken. Men!

But there was an emphatic, "No."

"Then why are you so upset?"

There was no response. Mohsina *khala* gave up exasperated, with her usual diatribe against modernity: "I don't understand you modern girls."

Uncle and aunt were upset to see Reshma in this state.

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"What happened? Have her in-laws said anything?"

"Don't know. She is not saying anything—just crying. Maybe you can get it out of her," I said.

But even they failed. We were all perplexed.

In the evening Reshma refused to dress for the reception and dinner, after which Reshma had to return with her in-laws.

Then she delivered the bombshell: she declared she was not going back. My poor aunt was aghast. She nearly fell out of her chair.

My mother, who had been draping herself majestically in a Banarasi sari, left it midway to trail on the ground and stared blankly at Reshma.

Mohsina *khala* raised her hands in despair: "These educated girls—you don't know what they will come up with. Imagine even having such a notion!"

But uncle refused to postpone the dinner. Reshma was forced to get dressed and we all put up appearances. We tried making polite conversation: the atmosphere was tense: the bridegroom glum and his mother pensive.

Things came to a climax when Anisa Begum inquired, "Does the bride wish to come back with us?"

My aunt gave a start and asked: "What makes you think that she doesn't want to?"

"Why? Has she not told you anything?"

My aunt shook her head and we all geared ourselves to hear the horror story.

"She told Asim that she hates him. He should not touch her again He had made her feel like a prostitute."

We were stunned.

"Now, is this the way a bride behaves? Can you imagine it?"

We could not My aunt stammered, "Reshma said that? I can't believe it."

"Why don't you ask her?"

My aunt made her way to Reshma's room. I followed

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her like a zombie. Reshma was still lying with her face turned towards the wall—tears streaming on the pillow.

When aunt demanded an explanation of what Anisa Begum had stated, Reshma blurted through hysterical sobs: "You don't know what he did to me. He just forced himself and took me without even trying to know me. It was horrible."

"See, this is what happens if you send girls to college: they get all kinds of silly notions in their heads," said Mohsina *khala* as she entered the room.

"My dear child," she explained, "this is what a man is supposed to do to his bride. If he had not done so, people would have gossiped. What did you expect him to do? Serenade you all night?"

"Stop being silly," my aunt chided Reshma. "Wash your face and get ready to go back with your in-laws."

Mohsina *khala* was smiling. She chuckled as she said, "What a child you are! So you have been crying about this! How funny."

I moved out of the room. I was not amused.

Perhaps what happened with Reshma was a normal experience to my grandaunt's generation: the bridegroom taking the bride without involving her or trying to know her. But for me and my cousins it was impossible to imagine it: to be taken as a piece of mindless flesh. Was it just a physical act? We did not think so: it was a union of body and mind. But my grandaunt or aunt would not understand: so how could they empathise?

Of course, what happened with Reshma was no earth-shaking event, nor was any grave injustice done her. It was a minor incident; nevertheless it left a bad taste. Reshma went back with Asim. They started living amicably and had children.

But years later, when I met her, she confessed to me that even after these years she could not remember that night without wincing with pain, wrinkling her nose with disgust.

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And she said that Asim had realised that it was his lack of consideration and understanding which was responsible for it.

I could not help feeling sorry. A little consideration could have gone a long way. It could have transformed the the event which every girl looks forward to and cherishes later on into a memorable one.

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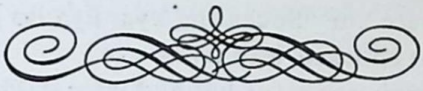
Aunt Zeba



AUNT ZEBA WAS FATHER'S ELDER BROTHER MURTUZA'S WIFE; she was also my mother's cousin, her father's brother's daughter. She was one of the loveliest women I have ever seen, with a satin-smooth milky white complexion, a small bud of a mouth, velvet black eyes fringed with thick curling lashes and glossy black hair trailing down her hips. Whenever aunt Zeba wore a black *dupatta*—which she often did, until one day when she finally gave it up—it seemed as if the moon had emerged from deep-dark clouds. She was no dumb beauty: sharp-witted and quick-tongued, she could hold her own in any *mehfil*. She had a mellifluous voice and she played the harmonium and the *dholak* to perfection. She could sing soul-stirring ghazals and also delightful *dholak* songs.

However, during the summer holidays when we got together at the farm house, we spent the sultry afternoons either singing *antakshiris* or *qawalis*. The *qawalis* were really a raucous affair with Aunt Zeba taking the lead, we (nearly a dozen cousins) forming the chorus, clapping in unison and at times raising quite a din. Sometimes Murtuza uncle's sharp ears picked our highpitched voices nearly a furlong away and he would roll in like rumbling thunder, his yellow hair all awry, his face red as a baboon and clothes reeking with sweat. He would give us one of his contemptuous looks and then concentrate his ire on his wife. "What do you think this is: a *kotah*?" or "If you were so fond of singing, you should have married a *gawaiah*" and he would fling a few obscenities (uncle had a bargeful of foul

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words at his command) and he would stomp out. At such times Zeba aunt's only response would be to don the black *dupatta*. Then in a sad voice and moist eyes she would mournfully sing the *Anmol Ghadi* songs, "Aaja meri barbad mohabat ke sahare" or "Socha tha kya, kya ho gaya", till her voice was chocked with tears.

We all felt very sorry for her and were baffled by this unequal combination. Here was no case of blind love: it was an arranged marriage. Aunt Zeba belonged to a *khandani* aristocratic family and was the only daughter of Khan-bahadur Syed Raes Hussein. Not that Murtuza uncle was from a bad family but unlike his other brothers he had not been to the university. He had actually not gone beyond school. He used to bunk school and loaf all around the village with the urchins and his uncouth manners and coarse speech could be traced back to those days. He had dropped out of school without completing his matriculation.

Since he was not educated he had taken to agriculture and looked after the family lands. But he didn't resent it: he took great pride in it and personally supervised the sowing and harvesting. He loved the fields and the village and never envied the life of his brothers who prospered in their respective professions in the city. He was very fond of us (his nieces and nephews) and not only was his house always open to us but he made it a point to send us fruits, jaggery, sugarcanes and *bhuttas* during the respective seasons.

But he was so coarse and countrified, specially in comparison to aunt Zeba. They seemed a study in pure contrast: she soft-spoken and refined; he clumsy and rustic. But he was never in awe of her. On the contrary, he was rough and harsh. We found it strange: any man would have been overwhelmed by such beauty and grace. But not uncle. Perhaps he had grown immune to it. They had been married for so long. Perhaps in the early days he may have been different. But my mother didn't agree. She related to us an incident from those days when aunt Zeba was a bride.

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She had decked herself up, arranging her hair in ringlets on her cheeks, powdered them with silver dust (as per the fashions of the day) and waited for him to return from the fields. And Murtuza uncle without as much as a word of appreciation or endearment had bawled: "What is the use of sitting with those scorpions on your cheek? A hungry man needs food not face powder!"

"Why did Zeba aunt marry uncle?" we inquired.

"Her father married her to him. What choice did she have?"

"But why did he?"

"Fate, my dear. There is no how or why."

But I was not satisfied with this answer. I had often observed the wistful expression in her eyes when she sang the *Anmol Ghadi* songs and was convinced that in the deep recesses of her heart she had loved another and had married uncle only under compulsion.

How correct I was in my assessment I realised a few days later when I saw her visibly disturbed—as she usually appeared when she had a particulary tormenting session with uncle—heading for my mother's room. She entered the room and shut the door behind her. I stood outside and applied my ears to the keyhole and was startled to hear Zeba *chachi* sobbing. A few minutes later I was even more shocked to bear her say: "Oh God! What had I done to deserve this! Why did you not get me married to Asad?" I heard my mother's horrified voice: "Hush! Zeba, it is *haram* for you to speak of another man."

"Another! Asad, another? He is always in my mind. How can he be another? I think of him always and will continue to do so."

"*Tauba! Tauba! Tauba!*" My mother sounded disgusted. "Your children are illegtimate."

I felt too upset to hear any more. How could her children be illegitimate just by thinking of another man? And who was this Asad? Why had she not married him?

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My mind was in turmoil. The whole day I moped around trying to find the reasons but could not. I could not contain myself any longer: I had to know. I therefore approached my mother and asked: "Mummy, was Zeba aunty engaged to someone called Asad?"

My mother looked alarmed: "How did you know?"

"Oh, I just happened to hear it."

Thankfully for me she didn't inquire any further. "Yes, he was. He was our cousin. Rauf *chacha's* son. But you must not mention these things to others." I promised I wouldn't.

"Then why didn't she marry him?"

"Raes *chacha* had a misunderstanding with Rauf *chacha* and broke the engagement leaving Zeba and Asad *bhai* shattered They loved each other. . . so very. . ." My mother's voice trailed away as she tried to recapture those days.

"Why didn't they elope?"

"Yes, they could have. The whole family was ready to help them and Raul *chacha* had also worked out a plan. But Asad *bhai* didn't wish to do anything which was dishonourable."

"Dishonour! What dishonour? The old man was being unreasonable. He had a misunderstanding with his mother—why punish his daughter? Probably he had developed cold feet."

"But that is an old story now. He has married and has two children."

"But why did her father choose Murtuza uncle? Were there no other suitable boys?"

"Well, Raes *chacha* found him suitable. He wanted a Syed boy and Murtuza uncle was a Syed and also belonged to a Kazi family."

"And therfore his looks and education were immaterial."

"Well, he liked his blond looks."

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"Blond! He looks like a lion. And what about his education or the lack of it?"

"They didn't inquire about his education. When they visited this house, they found rows and rows of shelves filled with books and foreign magazines. His other brothers were all at Aligarh at that time, so they presumed that he too was educated."

"Marvellous! This is the way the Khan-bahadur married off his daughter! How was Asad uncle?"

"Oh, he was so refined and cultured . . ."

"Has uncle met him?"

"No. But he has heard about the engagement."

"And aunt Zeba? Does she meet him?"

"No. Why should she?" My mother sounded indignant.

I was silent. I couldn't very well ask her, "Then why do you consider Asif, Husna and Shahid to be illegitimate?"

I was perplexed. The whole situation was too complex. However, a few weeks later I was able to understand it. I had been reading Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and I started drawing a parallel between Scarlett's love for Ashley and aunt Zeba's for Asad uncle. When Rhett Butler states that there are three in bed he implies that Ashley too is in their bed with Scarlett and him since he is in Scarlett's mind. Similiarly Asad uncle was always in Zeba aunt's mind and therefore Zeba aunt was mentally unfaithful to Murtuza uncle. This is what my mother had implied when she had stated that her children were illegitimate. Very profound indeed. I had not credited my mother's generation with such fine analysis. The Quran prescribed punishment only for physical adultery not mental—and that too in the presence of four witnesses!

Of course Aunt Zeba was not Scarlett nor uncle Murtuza Rhett Butler. But I couldn't help wondering whether like Scarlett, Zeba aunt would cease to love Asad uncle and start loving Murtuza uncle? But did he love her? What would be his reaction when he learnt that she loved another man?

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Would he throw her out of the house with three *talaqs*?

I didn't have to wonder for long. I came to know much sooner thaa I had expected.

Asad uncle had been elected as MLA and was visiting one of the villages of his constituency which was just a few miles away from our fields. Murtuza uncle, who had plenty of problems with the Tehsildar and his men, thought that this was just the right opportunity to impress them. He therefore decided to throw a lavish party in honour of his distinguished kinsman and also invited the Tehsildar.

On the day of the party the house gleamed and shone: the brass sparkled and there were flowers everywhere. The servants looked impressive in their Idd clothes. Aunt Zeba had taken out her best linen and the china which she had brought in her *jahez*. She herself looked absolutely gorgeous in a gold-studded black *dupatta* and black *kundan jhumkas*. Uncle too was in his best: a brown woollen *sherwani* though it was the height of summer, white *churidars* and his yellow hair neatly plastered down with pomade. He was terribly excited and kept peering out for a sight of his guest.

When Murtuza uncle went to peer for the nth time he beheld the car gliding under the welcome arch specially erected a few yards away. He hollered to all that the guest had arrived. We all rushed to the window. The car stopped and Asad uncle stepped out. We all held our breath. I was sixteen and susceptible to good looks and Asad uncle was extremely handsome. Uncle garlanded him and they shook hands. Uucle seemed uncomfortable. "What a contrast they present," remarked cousin Sajjida, and Hena added "like Vulcan and Adonis." Little did they know that Zeba aunt was engaged to Adonis and had married Vulcan! Asad uncle spoke and his voice had a lilt and refinement and uncle's welcome speech died on his lips. He made some introductory noises and slithered inside. I slipped away and followed him. He went to his room

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from where Zeba aunt was observing the spectacle. She turned with a start when his hands touched her shoulders. Her eyes were wet with tears. I froze and waited: for the accusations—the outburst. She hurriedly turned her head to wipe her tears. "Not now, don't," uncle was saying trying to console her. He was not angry, just disheartened. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard him say, "Your father did a great injustice to you: imagine marrying you to me and not to a fine gentleman like him!" He then added in a dejected voice, "Now what can be done? If I release you will he. . . ."

Aunt who had been listening to him with a dazed expression suddenly recovered and interrupted angrily, "How can you say such things! I think you should be with the guests. I will send the refreshments." He nodded and went out. Her eyes followed him: there was a strange light in them as if she had seen something for the first time and it had given her immense happiness. She then did a strange thing: she removed the black *dupatta*. I wondered at this gesture. Was it symbolic? Did it signify that she had ceased to mourn for Asad uncle's love? Had she realised that her husband had the courage to accept his drawbacks and cared enough for her to wish to release her? Had the candour and large heart beneath the crude exterior won her love? In any case, after this incident aunt Zeba never wore the black *dupatta* or sang the *Anmol Ghadi* songs no matter how much uncle raved and ranted.

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From my Grandmother's Notebooks

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE DAYS DURING THE PEAK OF THE MONSOON period in Bombay when rains lash the city for days and one despairs of seeing the clear blue sky. It was the monsoon of seventy five, and I was eighteen. I was at an age when the rains bring hope of love and romance. For is it not the time when the baked and parched earth blooms and the rain-washed trees sway in the soothing moisture-laden breeze scattering raindrops while the glorious rainbow spans the horizon? And do not the love scenes take place in almost all Hindi movies against the backdrop of a stormy night? But there was no hope of a romance for me. Why? Simply because I was not pretty, and beauty is essential for romance. Whoever fell in love with a simple plain-faced girl? Yes, Mr. Rochester did with plain Jane Eyre but then he was not my idea of a hero. Moreover, she only gets him when he is half blind. I preferred Mr. Knightly but then the Knightlys of the world are reserved for the Emmas, who are rich and pretty.

I felt depressed and stared enviously at the lights and music blaring from the flat across the street where the pretty air hostesses lived and were having a cosy party. No such fun for me. I felt disheartened. I moped around the house for some time, then decided to clean the attic. I always got over my bouts of self-pity when I applied myself vigorously to cleaning and dusting.

While I was clearing the attic which had not been cleaned for months I came across an old trunk which belonged to my grandmother who had been dead for

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ten years. I stared at it with mingled feelings of awe and affection. Anything associated with my grandmother held a special significance for me. I had simply adored her. She was such a lovely person—so kind and gentle. Her face floated before my eyes—the hazel eyes, the masses of very white hair framing a fair-complexioned delicately featured face. Even at that age one could easily say that she must have been a beauty in her youth. I was eight when she died of cancer in Hyderabad. At that time I had not understood the meaning of death but young as I was, I had realised seeing my father's red-rimmed eyes and hearing the solemn recitation of the Quran by sad-eyed groups of men and women that I would never see my grandmother again. And I was grief-stricken: for it meant a lot to me. It meant that I would always find the diwan empty when I rushed home to relate the day's happenings; it meant that she would no longer make those delicious little sweet-cakes for me on holidays; it meant that I would no longer have her at bed time telling stories of the Prophets: of Mohammed's childhood, of Noah's ark, of Joseph in Egypt, of Abraham's sacrifice, and it also meant that she would not be there to make dolls and sofa sets from match-boxes. I had felt very sorry for myself and had sobbed bitterly. But with time I had forgotton all those moments which now revived at the sight of the little iron trunk. I looked at it again. What did it hold?

With reverential hands, I opened the trunk. It contained many bric-à-bracs: her brass *pandan*, her prayer mat, the wooden stand for the Quran, her sewing and embroidery kit and pieces of cloth neatly tied in a bundle from which she had made dolls and their clothes—and a red notebook. I picked up the notebook and leafed through the pages which were yellow with age. It was written in Urdu and interspersed with important events dating from 1930 onwards right down to the early fifties *i.e.* nearly ten years before her death. I was curious: what were the events

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she had noted? They had all taken place before my birth. I couldn't read in the dim light of the attic. I therefore got down and settled in a comfortable sofa.

The entry in 1930 referred to her marriage with my grandfather which resulted in his being disinherited by his uncle and guardian. She wrote: "Azhar has today been disinherited and turned out of the house. His fault—he married me rather than his uncle's daughter." Very romantic, I thought. I had not know that my grandfather had married against the wishes of his uncle. It could not have been an arranged match. Very daring for the times. But two years later, strangely enough, they were separated. "I am back in my *maika*." She writes, "Azhar wishes to remarry: he does not love me any more." I was shocked. I had never known about their separation. Agitatedly I turned the leaves to know more: to know if there was a reconciliation. There was, after a few months—on my father's birth. A year back my uncle was born and shortly after his birth my grandfather died at the young age of twenty six leaving behind my grandmother a widow at twenty-two years.

I turned the pages for more information and a shocking lament caught my attention: "Badr is dead! There was a message from the household of the Nawab that Badr had died yesterday. But Badr, my dear sister, you had died the very day you were forcibly taken by the Nawab and confined to his harem."

I felt my head reel with these strange words. It was as if I was being shuttled in time to another age of Nawabs, soldiers, and harems. Weird! I couldn't believe that my grandmother's sister had been forcibly taken into a harem. I turned the pages for further light on the episode. But there was none. My mind was agog: I couldn't rest till I had found the whole story. I was sure my father would not speak about it. In any case I felt too embarrassed to ask him. I wondered if my mother knew; it was hardly possible

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that my grandmother had confided in her. But I decided to take a chance. Mummy knew: not everything but quite a lot. She had got it from her sources—from relatives and friends. From the bits and pieces she had heard, the tragic story of the two lovely sisters unfolded before my eyes.

"Your grandmother's sister Badr was a girl of exceptional beauty and there was no dearth of suitors for her but she could not get married before Mehr, your grandmother."

"Was grandma not beautiful?" I asked.

"She was lovely but she was also intensely religious."

Yes, she was. I remembered that she spent a lot of her time reciting the Quran or prostrating herself on the prayer mat. But I did not know that religiosity was a handicap for marriage. Why were men reluctant to marry a religious wife? Why? Simply because she would not be at her best all twentyfour hours of a day? "But then what has this to do with Badr landing up in the Nawab's harem?" I was more inquisitive about finding that. "Patience. I am coming to it. When she was sixteen, they went to the Imambara where the Moharram Majlis was in progress. There the Nawab's lustful gaze fell upon her and he wanted her to adorn his harem. He knew her father, an officer in the British army, belonged to a respectable Syed family and wouldn't give his daughter in a Beg's harem. Therefore he had her abducted." I couldn't believe I was hearing right. I had ceased to hear the rain lashing outside, my mother's voice also receded in the background and before my eyes was the scene of the Majlis and the agonised cries of "Hai Hussein, Hai Hussein" rending the air. I could see the mourners weeping and crying, clad in black as the orator, the Imam, recited the elegy of Imam Hussein's death. They were also bare-bodied young men who whipped their backs while they shouted "Hussein! Hussein!" As the voices reached a crescendo, the whippings became more frenzied till their backs were covered with blood. And while the atmosphere was charged with anguish, the roving eyes of the Nawab

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had found their mark: the innocent and lovely Badr whose beauty in the black *dupatta* was as luminescent as the full moon. Her beauty overpowered his mind and roused his lust. He beckoned his attendants and after making inquiries, signalled to his soldiers to carry her away. What perfidy! In such a sacred place and so solemn an occasion, to be abducted by a man who should have been their protector! Poor girl! What must have been her shock to find herself separated from her family and confined to the decadent and cloying harem; to sacrifice her innocence to statiate the lust of an aging and lecherous Nawab; and then discarded and forgotten, to waste her youth and beauty in a glided cage sans love.

"How did her family and her father react?"

"They were stunned. But her father very unwisely filed a suit against the Nawab."

"Why was it unwise?"

"He was only an officer—that too a native. The British did not wish to antagonise the Nawab for such a petty affair. They therefore tactfully got him to resign. The broken-hearted man took recourse to religion and became a Pesheman in a mosque."

"And Badr. Did she have any child?"

"No, she died childless. Her cousin Saleem was disconsolate with grief. They had planned to marry after Mehr's marriage."

"Did he marry?"

"Yes, he did; but he never forgot Badr and therefore never cared for his wife. She was very unhappy."

"It is such a pity that one wicked act blighted the lives of so many."

"Yes, it was sad. Beauty is not always a boon: it can also be a curse. It was in her case. Some poet has said, 'Achi surat bhi kya buri shai hai; jisne dekha buri nazar se dekha.' 'A good face is a bad bet; whoever saw, saw with an evil eye'."

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"And grandma. How did she get married? I believe grandfather married her against his uncle's wishes."

"Yes Your grandfather had been orphaned as a child and was brought up by his uncle who had got him engaged to his daughter Maryam."

"Maryam *phupu*! Squint-eyed and beak-nosed."

My mother chuckled. "No wonder your grandfather was not very enthusiastic to marry her."

The impression I had of my grandfather was tall, dark and handsome. One day he was copying the manuscripts for his uncle in the Asifia library and he caught a glimpse of a fair and lovely face as her *chaddor* had momentarily slipped. But it was sufficient. He followed her to the Pesheman's house. She was your grandmother."

"And he married her against his uncle's wishes," I completed the story. "But it didn't have a fairy-tale ending. Why were they separated?"

"They were temperamentally so different: he gregarious, flamboyant and adventurous; she religious, austere and an introvert. The disillusionment set in very fast. He was fed up of her religiosity and austerity. And to make matters worse he was burdened with earning a living for which he had not been trained. No wonder they drifted apart. If it was not for the birth of your father they may never have reconciled."

It was really sad that in spite of their beauty the two sisters had not led happy lives. If they had not been beautiful would they have been happy? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Their fates may have been different. Badr may not have been abducted. My grandmother would not have raised the expectations of my grandfather: then the disenchantment would not have been there.

"It's all kismet! Happiness has nothing to do with looks," Mummy was saying.

I nodded. I looked out of the window. It was still raining but I felt a tinge of joy, as when on a cloudy day one gets a glimpse of a patch of blue sky.

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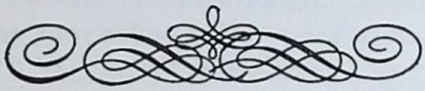
The Silence That Is More Eloquent Than Speech



AS THE TRAIN CRAWLED INTO NAMPALLY STATION HENNA WHO had been peering out of the window spotted Abba and shrieked in delight: "Nana *abba* is here, Ammi." I picked up Navid in my arms and edged towards the window. There among the milling crowds stood Abba looking lost. He seemed pale and haggard. Fear gripped me: I prayed that everything was well at home.

The moment the train halted Henna jumped out on the platform and darted towards him. He picked her up silently and kissed her; so unlike his usual self. I had never seen him so quiet and so subdued. Usually he would be waving gaily. "Arrey meri rani beti" he would say in that jocular tone with a twinkle in his eyes. As I went close and greeted him I noticed the dark circles under his eyes indicating sleepless nights.

"Is everything alright at home, Abba?"

He nodded in reply but the expression belied it. I felt perturbed. Everything was not O.K.

"Is the wedding taking place?" I had a nagging doubt that our unpredictable Jabeen may have had a change of mind.

"Oh. The wedding is taking place. Only the brides have changed. Azad is getting married to Sumbul and not to Jabeen."

I was flabbergasted. How? When? Where? The questions lashed my mind. I couldn't figure out how such a thing could come about. But Abba's only response was:

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"Your mother will explain it to you."

Unbelievable news. Were the days of miracles not over? How was it possible: Azad marrying not the bewitchingly beautiful and delightfully vivacious Jabeen but the deaf and dumb Sumbul? Maybe she had ditched him. That explained Abba's silence. But was it necessary to marry Sumbul? Of course Sumbul was a dear girl: so tender and serene. But to accept her as Azad's wife! Impossible! At Azhar Manzil, our joint family house where Jabeen and other relatives also stayed, a death-like silence prevailed: no one could have imagined that a wedding was to take place there the next day. Ammi was in her room and I went straight to her.

"Ammi, what is this I hear? It can't be true?"

"Unfortunately it is, my dear." Her eyes were red with crying.

"I don't understand. Has Jabeen backed out? Is she in love with someone else?"

"No, my dear. It is your brother who has brought this shame on us."

I was completely taken back. Azad and shame: the two words didn't go together. He was two years younger to me but I had always considered him to be the most decent and honourable human being. I had more faith in him than in myself. I couldn't believe that he was capable of bringing dishonour to the family.

"What has he done?"

"Sumbul is carrying his child."

The words hit me like lightning. "No," I said. "No," I repeated as if in a daze. "It can't be."

"It is, my dear."

I couldn't believe it, that Azad was vulnerable to the desires of the flesh. But why not? Was he not human? Poor boy! A moment's indiscretion had cost him dearly. To lose Jabeen. And what must Jabeen have felt when she realised that her fiancé of so many summers had succumbed

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to a deaf and dumb girl?

"I suppose there is no way out."

"What is there to suppose? We are not so heartless. In any case he will not listen. He had been keen to marry her for quite some time. We tried to dissuade him till we discovered her state."

"Where is Jabeen?"

"Jabeen has gone off on an excursion with some of her college friends. It was just like Jabeen—this I-don't-care-a-damn attitude. Attia of course like your Abba and Chacha is heart-broken. She blames herself: after all, it was she who adopted Sumbul after her cousin sister's death. But then how was she to know this strange quirk of fate?"

"Yes, it is really sad. But one cannot blame Sumbul."

"What is the use of blaming anyone, when your flesh and blood had betrayed you so shamelessly."

Shamelessly? I still couldn't associate such words with Azad. Azad who was so different from the boys of his age, so idealistic and altruistic. Even the during the college days instead of whiling his time like other boys in cinemas he would be tending to the sick.

After a wash and some refreshments I went to see Sumbul who lay in her room staring blankly at the ceiling. She was just nineteen, a year younger to Jabeen, and had always been her ardent admirer. But then, who didn't admire her? We all loved and admired her charm, her wit and her enchanting beauty.

As soon as she saw me she got down from the bed and bowed low in *adab*. My heart gave a tug when I perceived the anguish. Her eyes were red with weeping and her petal-smooth complexion was streaked with tears. I took her in my arms and pressed her close to my bosom. She burst into fresh sobs. Poor girl! Was it her fault that her world was silent? She had always been such a pet, helping us around and tending to us when we were sick. I remembered how she had sat up the whole night when Navid was ill.

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Henna and the other children just adored her. It was she who played with them—made frocks for the their dolls and kites and boats for the boys. I tried to console her, make he understand that she was not to blame for it.

But for all this we found it impossible to accept her. Was it because of her handicap? Yes, to some extent. But it mainly meant losing Jabeen. It meant sending her to some other family. It was heart-wrenching. We had seen her grow from a rosy-cheeked toddler into a cute prankster and then blossom into a breathtakingly beautiful teenager with superb poise. There was no dearth of proposals for her but Chacha had warned her to remain in the family and she had been engaged to Azad at fifteen. Of course Jabeen would have found somebody eminently suitable; but to lose Jabeen!

"*Phupu, Phupu.*" Three year old Aslam, Jabeen's nephew, came in crying to Sumbul. He had hurt himself while playing and his immediate reaction was to rush not to his mother but to the mute cousin aunt. He was certain that from her he would get sympathy, love and a total understanding. Sumbul didn't disappoint him: she hugged him and applied Iodex and managed to calm the hurt and disturbed child. It was typical of Sumbul. Jabeen of course had no time for children. She was the beautiful and incandescent "Shama" that lit up the *mehfils*. But the "Shama" would no longer light our *mehfils*. It was all because of Azad.

Jabeen and Azad, I had always thought about them together. I could not think of any other combination. It never occurred to any of us whether there was any meeting ground between this serious idealistic doctor and the delightfully free girl.

But then in an arranged marriage who ever bothered about temperament and wavelengths? No one did when Ehsan and I got married, were we compatible? But then we could sort out our problems, our differences through

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discussions. But Sumbul and Azad . . . I just couldn't imagine it!

That evening I went upstairs to Azad's room since I couldn't meet him when he reached from hospital. I didn't know how to interact with him: so much had passed since we last met. So much? Actually everything had changed: the whole gamut of relationships, concepts and attitudes. How would we face each other; discuss these delicate issues? But why did I need to question him about the whole affair? Was it not a *fait accompli*? What useful purpose would it serve—this postmortem? Just satisfy a woman's curiosity: what made my brother prefer this deaf mute to the ravishing Jabeen?

I was so lost in my thoughts that I was quite startled to hear his voice from behind.

"Hello, Appi." I turned and faced my brother. He was his usual self: cool and collected. His eyes were calm and betrayed no signs of remorse, but slowly a twinkle formed and he chuckled as he said: "So have you got over the bad news?"

I was nettled. Was he enjoying our discomfiture? Did he wish to shock us?

He discerned the infuriated look in my eyes and hastily apologised. "Sorry, Appi. I didn't mean to be flippant. Just trying to ease the tension. Anyway, how is Ehsan bhai? I received his letter yesterday regretting that he couldn't attend the wedding. But you must be relieved that he is not coming. Are you not, Appi?"

"Oh Azad!" I cried in a vexed voice. "Why did you do this? What are you trying to prove? Did you not think of the *khandan's izzat*? Of your parents, of . . . " I couldn't continue any further as rising sobs choked my voice.

Azad put his arms around me and gently took me to his room. "Appi, calm down, please. I know it must be shocking for all of you. I can quite understand how you feel. But then there are certain things in life for which there is no

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logical explanation.

"Where is the logic in this? What can you have in common with Sumbul? You can't even talk to. . . ."

"Oh Appi. you are speaking merely about verbal communication. There is something non-verbal too. There is also the language of the heart, of the soul. Can you describe in words love, sympathy, compassion, tenderness. . . ."

I was staring at him amazed. I was beginning to get a new insight into their relationship. He was gazing outside the window at the minarets piercing the sky. Yes, I suddenly realised this language of silence: where words had no meaning. But my curiosity was still not satisfied.

"You know, Appi, you all wanted me to marry Jabeen because she is beautiful. Well, she is one of the most beautiful girls I have seen. There can be no two opinions about it. And delightful too: men would just hang around her. But are we the same type? Would Jabeen have been happy with me? You know she is different from me: she loves parties and the lights; travelling and the free life. I am sure she would be happier married to a yuppie abroad."

"Are you trying to say that you have done this for her happiness?" I asked sarcastically.

He seemed to ignore the barb and went on: "Appi, do you ever recollect any instance when Jabeen had shown any concern for anyone? She was always like a gadfly."

"So you were irked by her indifference?"

"Oh no. Why should I be? Sumbul was always there with her calm and serene presence."

Yes, I thought, Sumbul was always there looking after him as she did for all of us.

"She was there when I came back from hospital; when I came back from my exams, when. . ."

"But was there a need for such a step?" I asked cutting in sharply.

"The need? I think it is a natural corollary when you

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are so emotionally dependent on someone. It was not consciously committed. You see, it just happened. That day . . . I was completely shattered. A patient had died . . . he was my patient . . . my first experience with death. I couldn't take it. As usual Sumbul was there reaching out to comfort me . . . and it just happened."

Yes, it all seemed so natural, when he explained it.

"I only hope you will be happy. If you think she is the right partner for you, it is OK. All the hoo-haa will die down with time. Chacha and Chachi will soon forgive and forget once Jabeen is married. But I only hope you will not regret it."

"No. You can rest assured."

I couldn't help marvelling at his confidence. Love is indeed a force to reckon with: it could make silence more eloquent than speech.

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Portrait of an Uncle

WHEN I PENNED THIS PORTRAIT, MY UNCLE HAD BEEN DEAD AND buried next to my grandfather in the family cemetery for nearly five weeks. But I got this shattering news only two days back. Actually everyone at home had been preparing me for it for nearly a month with regular bulletins of his deteriorating condition. They had been afraid that I would not be able to withstand the shock and that I would lose consciousness like my aunt—his younger sister—did when she received the news in the U.S.A. She had to be admitted in hospital and regained conciousness only after three days! Astounding, isn't it? But my uncle was such an extraordinary human being that such a reaction from his near and dear ones was expected.

When we were kids, he was for us that fairy-tale uncle all unhappy children dream of: an uncle who would take them away from a miserable world of cross parents, nasty teachers, tedious homework and bland food to a realm of fun and frolic of picnics, movies, chocolates and icecreams.

I hadn't met uncle for years—my job, the pace of life, the distances made it difficult for us to visit him. But my memories of childhood and growing up are so inextricably linked up with him that I felt a part of me had died. Life would henceforth never be the same again.

Life was indeed exciting when he was around. His presence was like a fresh cool breeze in a stuffy room. He was the soul of any party, enlivining it with his scintillating wit. We can never forget the fantastic times we had: the movies we went to, the picnics and the outings to the parks

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and the beaches and the delightful evenings at his favourite resturaunts.

Uncle loved food: *kababs*, *biryanis*, *tandoori* chicken and sweetmeats such as *rasgullas* and *gulabjamuns* were his favourites. But he enjoyed it more when he was sharing it was his friends or with his nieces and nephews. I think it gave him great pleasure to watch us gobbling the goodies with unreserved relish: eyes shining, cheeks glowing.

Uncle was a splendid mimic and he was so handsome that I always thought he would make a marvellous actor. Instead he became a lawyer and though I never saw him perform in the district court, the scenes he enacted for us were superb—straight out of the Hindi movies.

But his first case was absolutely outrageous. It was a case of molestation in which the accused had allegedly caught the hand of a woman who was on her way to ease herself in the field. And my uncle who we considered to be the champion of the downtrodden was the defence lawyer of the accused! When I indignantly asked him why he had not taken up the woman's case his sardonic reply was: "Because I am not the public prosecutor."

But his appointment a few years later as public prosecutor did not bring out the chivalrous side of his nature. On the contrary, I remember an incident which revealed a certain ambivalence in his nature towards women: that he had one set of rules for those within the family circle and another for the rest of womankind.

The incident took place during the Diwali holidays. I awakened early in the morning to a strange cacophony of sounds emanating from the courtyard and peering out of the window I beheld an amazing sight: a crowd of at least fifty Banjara men and women, letting out weird moaning sounds, were gathered around a young Banjara woman who while emanating anguished cries was also performing cartwheels with unimaginable vigour. The servants—the cook, the maid, the driver, the gardener—had all drawn up their chairs and

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settled down to watch the *tamasha*. But there was no sign of uncle. Where was he?

I rushed down to his room. He was there. Coolly shaving while Talat Mehmood's soulful number played in the background and the fragrance of the perfume "Jannatul Firdaus" wafted in the air. (Uncle loved perfumes next to food and music). Before I could open my mouth my twelve year old brother charged in and started firing a volley of questions: "Uncle, why are these men and women wailing? Why is that woman performing acrobatics? Why have they entered our compound?"

My uncle had replied nonchalantly, intent on trimming his moustache: "The police have arrested her husband and put him behind bars. They are therefore expressing their anger and grief. And that woman is performing acrobatics to warm herself since she has become cold without her husband."

That really puzzled my brother as it would have any child of his age. He asked, "Has he taken all the quilts to the prison?" My uncle chuckled. I felt embarrassed. Was he going to explicitly explain to my brother? And was the whole sordid affair only a joke to him?

But my uncle didn't bother to reply. He stepped into the verandah and yelled at the servants: "Get these people out of here or else I will call the police."

His reaction to the Shah Bano affair further confirmed my doubts about the curious dichotomy in his nature. He vehemently condemned the Shah Bano judgement which allowed maintenance to a divorced woman. He who had always been supportive of us—the girls in the family—in acquiring further education, in exercising our right to choose a partner and walk out of an unhappy marriage, had been contemptuous of the women supporting it "Shameless, rapacious women," he had called them.

I was disconcerted by his reaction. Would he have reacted in the same manner if one of us was in the same

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plight? He shrugged his shoulders and said all women couldn't be placed in the same category. I was silent. But this statement gave me cause to ponder: Was there any deep-rooted cause for this dichotomy? Was there an unhappy experience in the past? Had it so deeply scarred his psyche that he was reluctant to marry? Till then I had always considered that the real hindrance was the romantic in him: he visualised an ideal partner. He had once wistfully said, "I have yet to meet the woman made for me."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"A very special woman."

However, his intimate friends were of the view that his reluctance to marry was a reaction to my grandfather's desire to remarry immediately after my grandmother's death.

My uncle had been disgusted: the idea of another woman taking his mother's place was repugnant to him. He protested vehemently and spewed venom at all the intended candidates as being after the old man for his money. He probably considered them to be a "greedy, rapacious lot".

Months of tension followed when they were not on talking terms and one day after a heated exchange he left the house. He returned only after my grandfather had abandoned his marriage plans. Some sort of reconciliation did take place between father and son, but my uncle never forgave his father for what he considered was a breach of loyalty to his mother.

Of course, his friends and relatives didn't agree on this. They felt he had been too harsh on my grandfather. They didn't consider anything amiss in his desire for remarrying. After thirty wonderful years with my grandmother the prospect of facing life alone must have been terrifying. And in old age the need for companionship and the fear of loneliness are more acute than when we are young. But this my uncle could not understand—he had been young, just about twenty one, and the whole world was before him.

However, when he lay sick and ailing, alone in the huge

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mansion, did he experience loneliness and helplessness? Did he not regret his decision? He did feel that in the end he was alone. He had told the doctor that in life one is alone; all others—brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews leave you. But it was not true. We never knew of his illness. He had never informed us and therefore we were not there when the end came. But does it matter now when his body is reduced to dust and mingled with his father's? No, not to him; but to us, yes. Yes, we wish we could have been with him in the last months and made him cheerful and happy as he had made us during the sad moments in us child-hood.

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The Silver Lining

I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY EYES. THE WOMAN SITTING OPPOSITE to me with a child in her lap was Asma! Yes, it was truly, undeniably her, though she had changed beyond all recognition. The ruddy girl with the soft brown hair was transformed into a haggard bleary-eyed woman with streaks of gray in her pretty hair—and she couldn't have been more than twentyfive!

"Asma," I said touching her lightly. "It's Asma, isn't it?" She started blankly for a moment and then recognition dawned in her eyes.

"Rabia! How come you are here?—Did you board the train at Baroda?"

"Yes. I am teaching at the University; returning home for the vacations. What about you?"

She was silent and then taking a deep breath said: "It's a long story. Will tell you by and by."

"The baby in your lap?" I inquired haltingly. I had heard that Asma had got married to her cousin. The baby who may have been two or three years old didn't resemble her: he had dark button eyes and a mass of black curls.

"My son Amir. Amir, aunty *ko salam karo*." Amir grinned and showed no inclination to *salam*. He was completely occupied with the hustle and bustle of the railway platform. He gave a start as the whistle sounded. The train chugged out of the platform of Vadodara station. Asma's eyes were moist as she stared out of the window.

"Going to Bombay?" I asked. She nodded silently, gave a brief look at me and turned her head away as tears

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welled in her eyes. I thought better to leave her alone; let her compose herself.

I looked around the packed compartment—there was hardly any moving space—the trains from Baroda to Bombay were always packed: with students and traders. The traders commuted daily between Bombay and Baroda buying wholesale from the mills of Surat and Baroda and selling at exorbitant rates in Bombay. Indeed Baroda was a shoppers' paradise. Every time I went home I carried loads of saris, *ghagra cholis* with mirror work at throwaway prices and gifted them to friends and relatives. This time too I had bought yards and yards of mirror work to dazzle all the cousins back home. My cousin Nilofer was getting married and we all—there were seven of us in the same age group—had decided to wear *ghagra cholis* for the *mehndi* ceremony. It was mainly a women's function and if the conservative ladies were going to be shocked at our "un-Islamic" clothes—we didn't care. I smiled to myself as I imagined the horror in the eyes of the elderly ladies as we whirled around in the *ghagra cholis*. "What's so amusing?" I heard Asma and saw her watching with a bemused expression. Her son was busy twirling the ears of a toy elephant.

"Oh nothing much. My cousin Nilu is getting married next week; was just thinking how we would shock all our aunts and grandaunts with our new *ghagra cholis*. You know how conservative these people are."

"Yes, they are very particular about clothes," she said smiling weakly. "What about you, Rabia? Have you settled down?"

"You mean got married. No, not yet."

"Why? Are your parents not thinking on these lines?"

"Thinking?" I repeated with a shrug. "Why, they think of nothing else. But with my dark complexion, no dowry and outspoken manners there are few takers and among them most have their sons abroad. You know in such cases there is always the problem of knowing the

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boy—*dhoka ho sakta hai.*"

"Hunh; but then that can happen even amongst persons you have known and the shock in such cases is greater. Marriage is a gamble," she added with a sigh.

"Mumma, Mumma, sweets," little Amir cried out as he sighted the vendor selling sweets. Asma bought him a Five Star and he gurgled happily as he tore the gold covering.

"He is not like you. I presume he takes after his father," I remarked.

"Yes," she said, "but I hope it is in looks only." Her eyes clouded again. I felt uncomfortable.

"You know, Rabia, I got married to my cousin when I was in my final year of MBBS. It was fixed up when I was in school. He has a furniture shop in Bombay."

"But why did you get married before completing your studies?"

"I had not wanted to but my aunt was keen that the marriage take place immediately. And in a few months I realised the reason for this haste: I came to know about Aslam's involvement with another girl. He didn't care for me and wanted to marry this girl. I didn't know what to do. I had already conceived. However, I decided to complete my studies and went back to my parents. I didn't tell my parents the real story. I cleared my medicals a mouth before Amir was born. Soon after his birth my aunt cameto take me me home. I wasn't keen but my mother who by now knew all urged me to go back. 'He will change,' she said. 'A man always does when he becomes a father. You are not only his wife now but the mother of his child.' I went back but things hadn't changed. The sight of his baby did have a momentary effect but he was adamant in marrying the girl. 'Why shouldn't I marry? My religion permits me. I married the first time to please my mother; now I will marry to please my-elf.' It was so simple for him."

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"And what about your aunt? What had she to say?"

"My aunt tried to stop him. He than embarked on his strategy of easing me out. He made life a virtual hell for me. He was always criticising me, abusing me and constantly comparing me to her. One day I got fed up and walked out with Amir and went back to my parents. A month later I received the divorce papers by post. Now he has married that girl."

"What about the *mehr*? Did he give you that?"

"What *mehr*? You know we have a tradition of fixing a *mehr* of fifty one rupees."

"Fifty one!" I couldn't believe I had heard it right.

"Yes, fifty one rupees. I believe that fifty dirhams was the *mehr* of Fatima."

"Yes, but fifty one dirhams was a lot of money in those days and that was all that Hazrat Ali could afford. You know he had to sell his armour to pay that amount."

"I know, but who is going to explain all that— people just follow traditions blindly."

"And what did your *khandan* people do: did they protest?"

"Why would they? As far as they were concerned I shouldn't have walked out. I should have borne it!"

"Damn them all!" I cursed. "If a woman wears jeans or skirts everybody will condemn her. But if man messes a woman's life nobody bothers. What kind of justice is this?"

I was vehement and my voice was shrill with indignation. Some of our fellow passengers, specially those who were sitting around, had been listening and now joined in. One old lady said, "*Arey beti*, this is the world. Men are always like this. After all, how can one one control a man's heart?"

"Yes; one cannot control a man's heart. But everyone tries to control both the heart and body of a woman. She cannot do anything without consulting the male members of the family. I don't. . ."

"Be calm, Rabia," Asma said catching hold of my

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hand. "There is no need to get so upset."

"I don't understand you. . ." I said.

"Look, the future is not so bleak. I am a qualified doctor. I know my life is not happy but then I have Amir."

"Yes, that is something," I murmured. "You are lucky to have been educated."

"Yes. It is the silver lining. I can not only earn my living but also mitigate the suffering of others. And moreover I have an offer in Muscat. I will be leaving in a week's time. Will come back after two years and set up a clinic."

"That's nice!"

"Yes. So you see it's so bad. Marriage is a chance: it may turn out well or be a disaster. It is a risk one takes. And that is why I feel it is necessary to have something to to fall back on. Education or knowlege of some skill, you know."

"Yes," I said. "That is necessary." At twenty five Asma had seen so much, suffered so much: she was so much wiser than me. "Yes, Asma," I repeated. Yes, that is the way out. I looked out of the window. The train was moving towards Valsad and on both sides were lush green mango and *chiko* trees studded with fruits. . . .

Notes:

* Fatima was the Prophet's daughter.
** Fatima was married to Hazrat Ali who was also his cousin and the third Khalifa.

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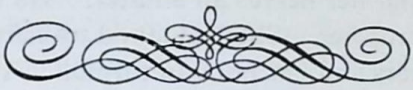
Destiny



NO! SHE THOUGHT THAT MAN BEING INTRODUCED BY HER friend and hostress Salma couldn't be Sajjad. Sajjad in Chicago? Impossible! She went a little closer and peered and then froze. The man was indeed Sajjad! Though gray and haggard it was unmistakably him. And the garishly dressed plump woman beside him must be his wife. She felt a lump in her throat as memories of their parting flooded her and she hastily excused herself and bolted from the drawing room. She took refuge in the bathroom but the old memories haunted her. After all those years to be facing him! But how changed he was! How different from the first time she had met him at his cousin and her friend Nafisa's wedding! But that was nearly twenty years ago.

Twenty years ago, she, a girl in her early twenties, a graduate from J.J. School of Arts and a commercial artist in a leading advertising company, had met Sajjad Haider, an attractive, serious and idealistic doctor. And though till then she had always scoffed at the idea of love at first sight, she had fallen irrrevocably in love with him. She was sure she could spent her whole life with him—in any part of the world.

Since that part of the world happened to be a one-horse town set between the Balaghat ranges and tha Manjura river in the district of Osmanabad, her mother and friends were aghast when she accepted Sajjad's proposal.

The wedding had been the usual affair: the *nikah* and *rukṣati*. But since they were to leave for his town the

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next day, rooms had been booked at the hotel. She had felt repelled by the idea of spending her *suhag-raat* at the hotel. But she had silently followed him into the room, her heart pounding and her nerves all aflutter. He was smiling and moving towards her. She had stood transfixed, eyes glistening with tears and her mind in turmoil. This was not how she had imagined it. She was however surprised when he took her hands in his, gazed deeply into her eyes and said softly: "I know how awful you feel. One doesn't look forward to a wedding night in a hotel room. If you agree we can have it at my place—my home where I grew from child to man."

She had wanted it so—to achieve a union in his surrounding. She remembered wistfully their wedding night when they had achieved a oneness. It had been a moonlit night— the moon was so bright that its light shimmered in their bedroom through a prism and the emerald in her ring glistened green and the diamond shone luminously against his black hair as her fingers entwined it.

The days had flown by: sketching, performing chores around the house with the mother-in-law, sitting and chatting with Sajjad, and later in the still dark night they would be together, their love melting into each other.

But as time passed the hope in her mother-in-law's eyes gradually turned to despair and she started dropping hints that Sajjad should remarry. He didn't seem to take the hints and therefore she had come out bluntly. "You are my only son," she had said, "and it is your duty to provide me with a grandchild. If Arjumand cannot conceive then you will have to remarry."

She had held her breath while she had watched Sajjad's reaction. His tone had been gentle but firm: "Ammi, Arjumand can have a son only if God wills it. And if I have to have a child it will be only from her."

But the same Sajjad had made a complete *volte face* when he realised that his mother had cancer. The old lady

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lady had sobbed that she would die without her wish being fulfilled and that thought seemed to have completely overpowered his reason.

She could never forget that day he had broken to her the shattering news. It had been raining, pouring after months of drought and the parched earth sighed in relief exuding a fragrance she found intoxicating. Now, she thought, the earth would sprout the seedlings, the leafless trees would again become green and the flowers bloom again. But not her womb. Hot tears had mingled with rain.

"Arjumand! You'll catch a cold." She had heard Sajjad as he come up from behind while she stood drenched in the rain He had taken her inside and she had changed into dry clothes but the water continued to drip like pearls from her straight black hair. Sajjad had gently rubbed her hair with a towel but when his eyes met hers he realised that they were wet with tears not rain.

"Now what is the matter?" he had asked in a concerned voice. She had broken down sobbing. "What is it, love?" he asked again.

"Oh Sajjad! Why is my womb more barren then this earth?

He had taken her in his arms and gently kissed away her tears. And then said, "Arjumand, it seems that it is not God's will."

She had looked into his eyes and fouud them filled with pain. Was it a *fait accompli* that she could not have a child? She felt her body tremble. Sajjad tightened his arms around her and said softly: "I have something very distressing to tell you." She had felt fear grip her heart. What was he going to tell her? That she was incapable of having a child. No, he had told her while her face was still warm from his kisses that he had agreed to remarry and the marriage was to take place within a month. She had been stunned. He had pleaded with her; he was, he said, helpless

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and assured her that the other woman was nothing more than a surrogate womb.

She had remained silent. What could she say when he had decided to take destiny in his hands? But that day, after he went to the hospital, she had left his house forever with a request for separation.

But the ways of God are strange. Just a couple of days before the wedding she realised that she had conceived. But she had not informed Sajjad. Why should she? Had he not given up hope of her ever conceiving? Was she really supposed to contact him and tell that God had given her child? No, she had decided that she would never let him know.

As soon as she had her separation she had left India and joined her brother in States. Here she had their daughter, with Sajjad's velvet-black eyes and dark curly hair. She had named her Mehek—the name Sajjad and she had chosen for their unborn offspring.

There was a knock at the door and she heard Salma's anxious voice inquiring: "Arjumand? Are you there?" She had opened the door saying, "Why, what's the matter?"

"Amer is looking for you. Why did you just disappear?"

"Salma, that couple you have been introducing . . ."

"Who? Sajjad Haider and his wife? . . ."

"Yes. He is my ex-husband. . ."

"Oh no. I didn't know, love. Alam invited him. Mrs. Haider is related to him—distant cousin. But now it has put you in an embarrassing position. I suggest you make an exit from the other door. I will tell Amer."

"No, I can't just leave Mehek and Amer. Amer may misunderstand. I will have to face the situation. By the way, how many children do the Haiders have?"

"None. Mrs. Halder has some problem."

Arjumand lowered her eyes. She didn't wish Salma to see the triumph and joy in them. She felt ashamed but then

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she was human. And human beings could hardly forget or forgive so easily. With averted eyes she replied, "I'll just join you all in a few minutes." She again went to his bathroom and took a quick look in the mirror. The visage reflected was older, more mature than the one which had left Sajjad ten years ago but it was still pretty. Time and life had not treated her unkindly. She had been lucky to meet and marry Amer.

Amer, a widower with two sons, had been a close friend of her brother: a gentle, kind and affectionate man in his early forties. A warm and relaxed friendship developed between them. And when Mehek was about four Amer had proposed to her and she had accepted, mainly because she wished to provide Mehek with a family. She had never regretted it. If the marriage lack the passionate intensity of first love it was amply compensated by a calm, mature understanding. Amer proved himself a devoted and considerate husband and an affectionate father to Mehek showering her with the same love and affection which he did on his sons. Though enveloped in the warmth of a contented marriage she could neither wipe away the memories of her first love nor the deep hurt within her. And today. . .

She shrugged her shoulders and walked into the drawing room she was completely taken back to see Amer and Sajjad standing together. But while Amer spoke Sajjad's eyes were glued to Mehek who was sitting a few feet away. Seeing the direction of his gaze Sajjad had called Mehek and she heard him say, "Sajjad, this is my daughter Mehek."

Sajjad's eyes were filled with anguish. Mehek was the name they had chosen for their unborn chiid,

Amer had sensed her presence and turning to her he said with his warm smile: "Where have you been? I want you to meet Dr. and Mrs. Haider." Sajjad's eyes met hers; with recognition there was anguish and remorse in them.

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He could hardly believe that Destiny had played such a cruel trick on him. Arjumand stood before him smiling and pretty, with her husband. She had found contentment in the arms of another man. And the fragrance of the child he had longed and prayed for filled the house of another man. Yes, she was his child—he knew for certain. She had his eyes and hair. The irony of it was that Arjumand had given her the name they has chosen. Had Arjumand conceived when he had told her about his intention to remarry? Why had she not informed him? But had he given her the opportunity? He had been so eager to please his mother! He had trampled on her feelings, simply to gratify those of his mother. A lump arose in his throat. His mother had died without seeing her grandchild though Mehek had been born in her lifetime. But then, how was she to know? His sacrifice had been in vain and he was saddled with a woman he neither loved nor respected. He was suffering and it was reflected on his face.

Arjumand understood his suffering. A wave of pity enveloped her, replacing the love and hurt: she no longer held any rancour against him. On the contrary, she forgave him and the past ebbed away. She looked steadily into his eyes and in a calm and gentle voice said: "Hello, nice to meet you."

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Turning Point

WHILE THE SUN BLAZED OUTSIDE MAKING IT WELL NIGH impossible for any living being to stir out, Rabia sat in the zenana with her mother and aunts stitching *gotas* and sequins on *dupattas*. But supposing instead of the searing heat the weather been cool and pleasant would they be sauntering out? No chance. Irrespective of the seasons they were enclosed within the four monotonous walls. And what better preoccupation was there than to stitch sequins? At least their sparkle would brighten the darkness of their cloistered lives.

How depressing! How had her mother and aunts put up with it for years? Her life had been different: she had been allowed to study—to attend the women's college. Of course the restrictions were there: she had to drape the *chadder*; she couldn't go to the cinema; she couldn't eat out in the restaurants or roam about in the market with friends. It was college and back. These restrictions rankled but it was better than virtually being imprisoned within the four walls of the *haveli*.

There had been times when she had rebelled against these restraints: questioned her mother. Her mother's stock answers were: girls from different decent familes didn't wander around without *chadder* nor were they seen in cinema houses and restaurants; such girls were considered loose and no decent man would accept them. When she got engaged the argument was reinforced: the boy may break the engagement and she would rue for life.

This line of argument was beyond her comprehension.

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No one outside seemed to look down on the other girls: no one considered them loose. All her friends—Sunita and Vinita and Suman—moved around town in the bazars and restaurants—and were none the worse for it. Sunita had got married last month, Veena had gone abroad with her fiancé. Would Jameel break the engagement if she was seen in a cinema hall or restaurant?

Jameel was her second cousin and their marriage was fixed to take place in a week's time. Except for the exchange of *adabs* she had hardly ever spoken to him. But then she had hardly spoken to any male cousin since that day nearly eight years ago. That day she underwent a complete metamorphosis. What a trauma it had been! Within hours her whole perception of life had changed.

How vividly she remembered that day which had wrought such a transformation in her life.

"Why are you so quiet, Rabia?" inquired Choti *chachi*.

"I was just trying to concentrate on the pattern. It is a bit intricate."

"That's only an excuse," teased Rehana *chachi*. She was Jameel's *khala* and was married to *chacha*. "We know where her concentration is."

Rabia turned crimson with embarrasment: she just didn't know how to react to such talk, specially from her aunts and mother. It was bewildering, this lighthearted manner of using sexual innuendoes while teasing her about marriage when for years they had been so inhibited and and evasive about sex at least in front of her. She had been horrified when Butul *chachi* had laughed when she had requested her to leave the room because she wanted to change.

"Why? You have the same 'things' as me. In any case, you had better get used to undress in front of us. otherwise . . . you will find it difficult to after marriage."

And she had winked. Rabia had turned crimson at the

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implication of her *chachi's* words. She seemed to be on the verge of another transformation: a transformation which would require erasure of all that she had been taught, yes, all that had been drilled into her all these years commencing right from that *Day.*

That day had been the turning point: within hours her life had changed. She had been transformed from a child into a woman. One minute she had been climbing the guava tree and next minute she heard her brother shouting in a horrified voice: "Appi, the blood! There is blood on your *salwar*. You have hurt yourself."

She had felt no pain—seen no wound, but there were blood stains on her *salwar*. To her dismay she realised that the blood seemed to be oozing from inside—from where the piss came. Perhaps something had burst inside. In panic she rushed to her mother.

Her mother's reaction was incomprehensible: she was not alarmed, just agitated. She scuttled her into the zenana speaking all the time in a hushed voice as if something had taken place. Inside she informed her elder aunt: "Bhabi, it has come." She saw them exchange meaningful glances. Bewildered she had asked, "What has happened to me? What has come?"

Her mother answered in a sombre voice, "You will not understand now. Later. But something significant has happened: a momentous change has taken place in your body. You are no longer a child: you are a a woman. You must be sober and dignified. You are not to run and climb trees and play with boys. You must keep away from men. Guard your body. Keep it concealed from the sight of man. And keep this happening a secret from all: do not discuss it with your friends."

She had been over-awed with these instructions and completely baffled For the life of her she couldn't imagine what oozing of blood had to do with men and boys. But one thing it did: it ended her fun-filled carefree days.

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And then followed misery: the terror of being discovered by her friends every time she got it. And she was ashamed of the changes in the body, she felt like a cow with her breasts bursting out. She had one hell of a time trying to come to terms with her changing physique. And the admonishments which emanated from her mother every time her *dupatta* slipped didn't mend matters: it aggravated her self-consciousness. She fervently prayed that these udder-like things would just disappear.

But things changed: she discovered he experiences were normal. Other girls also got it; they were not ashamed. They were not ashamed of their breasts—rather proud of them *i.e.* if they had enough of them! Sheila would stuff cotton in her bra to make them look fuller and Sunita and other girls complimented her: "You have nice boobs." She was amazed: they were an asset among her friends but a liability at home. Oh the dichotomy between the world at home and outside!

And the greatest difference between her friends and the life at home was in relation to boys. At home it was a forbidden topic but in school the girls seemed to be obsessed with it. And gradually the discussion veered around another forbidden subject: sex.

And with this explosive knowlege came the realisation of the significance of her periods and the warnings against mixing with boys or members of the opposite sex.

And with knowlege came the painful awareness of the goings-on behind closed doors. And it puzzled her: If this was the way babies were ordained to be born then why all the secrecy? Why this shame? Why were they so ashamed of explaining it?

And now she would have to decondition her mind. She who had never exposed as much as a bare arm to a man would have to be naked before him! Allow him to touch her!

Touch her! Touch her in those sensitive secret places! Every thing that had been a taboo, unmentionable, would become legitimate and beautiful! Overnight, a whole new

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change would take place. Sunita had described it as an ecstatic experience, an act of sharing: of communion. It was the awakening of her womanhood! It was for this act that the body had been gearing up: it was for this mingling that nature had wrought changes within her.

But her whole being revolted against the act: she couldn't bear this suffocating intimacy: she couldn't bear that anyone should touch her there—go within her.

She got up abruptly and walked out of the room, her face red with shame. She felt the nausea overtake her and threw up in the courtyard.

"What's the matter, Rabia?" She heard her mother's voice from behind.

She turned around and replied, "I am OK."

"No. You are not. Something is troubling you. You are not yourself. What has happened?" She sounded concerned and taking her to her room said gently, "Come tell me."

"Nothing really. I am just a little tense about my marriage. It is very close."

"So what is there to worry about? They are our relatives. You will be in the same city."

"I wasn't thinking of that aspect. I was just afraid. . ." her voice just trailed away. She couldn't bring herself to speak about her fears—her revulsion.

Her mother smiled. "It's natural. We are all afraid. It is a new life we are entering. But you know the family . . and there is no fear of Jameel not liking you."

"It's not that. It's just that I will not be able to. . ." She couldn't continue. Her mother's eyes seemed to be getting large with fear.

"What have you been up to! What have you done?"

"I haven't been up to anything," she retorted. And then facing her said with all the courage she could summon, "What I am trying to explain is that after so many years of inhibitions and supression of emotions; after considering

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men and sex a taboo, I find it impossible to respond to a man."

Her mother was shocked: "I don't understand all this talk. What has it got to do with your responding to Jameel? He is not any man. He is to be your husband. You will be responding to your husband. It is your duty to do so."

"But it is impossible! I have a mental block after the . . ."

"What block?" her mother cut in furiously. "You are crazy. Every girl faces this. You are not the first girl in the world to get married? Why do you make such a fuss about it?"

"But, Ammi, Jameel and I don't know each other. We have never spoken to each other. Without knowing how can we. . ."

"Don't know?" Her mother was getting exasperated. "Which girl from a decent family knows her husband before marriage? Did I know your father? Stop talking such rubbish! All this western education attending college has given you such crazy notions. Imagine equating any man with one who is going to be your husband! Pray to Allah to rid you of such black blasphemous thoughts."

Rabia gave up. Her mother seemed to imagine that the very word "husband" was like a magical formula—something like "*khul ja sum sum*" and in a jiffy it would erase all her inhibitions and transform her.

But then her mother had always lived in seclusion, in a world which was protected from outside influences; it was a world steeped in tradition and blind obedience to the dictates of elders. She had not been exposed like her to the modern world—never had to cope with the onslaught of divergent viewpoints. How would she be able to ever understand, leave alone empathise with her dilemma? Rabia felt trapped between the secluded world at home and the free world outside.

But Jameel also traversed between two worlds. Would

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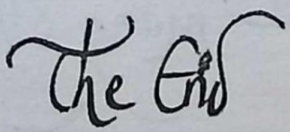
he understand her conflict? Would he be patient with her, give her the time and space to shed her probias? Or would he consider her too intense: hypersensitive? Only time would tell: which was only a week away. Till then she must brace up and prepare for the worst.



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WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It consists of a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation. Its task is that of defining and substantiating that role by discussion and diffusion of creative writing and transcreation from India, the Commonwealth, and other English-using territories.

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